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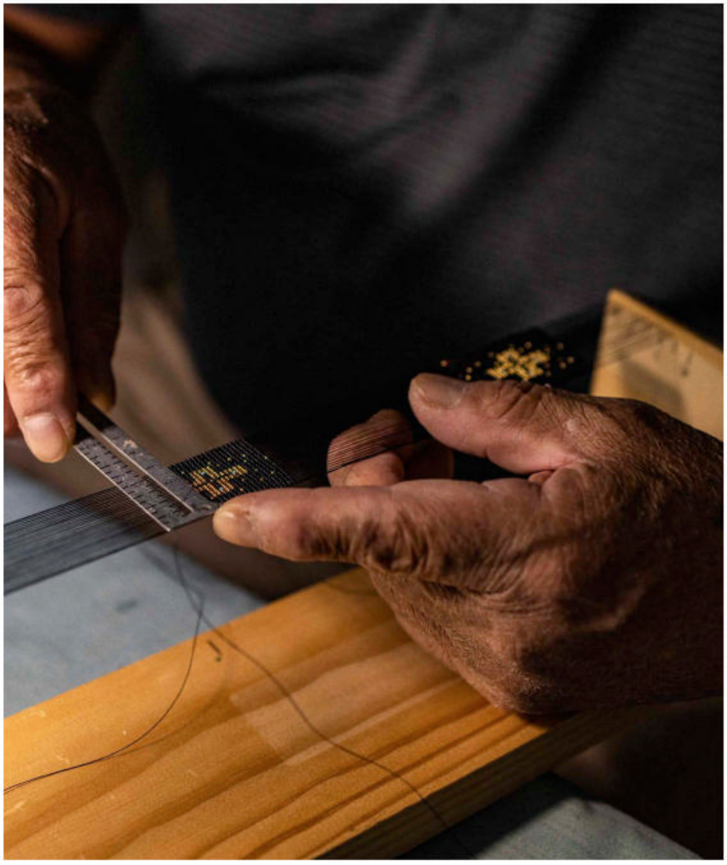

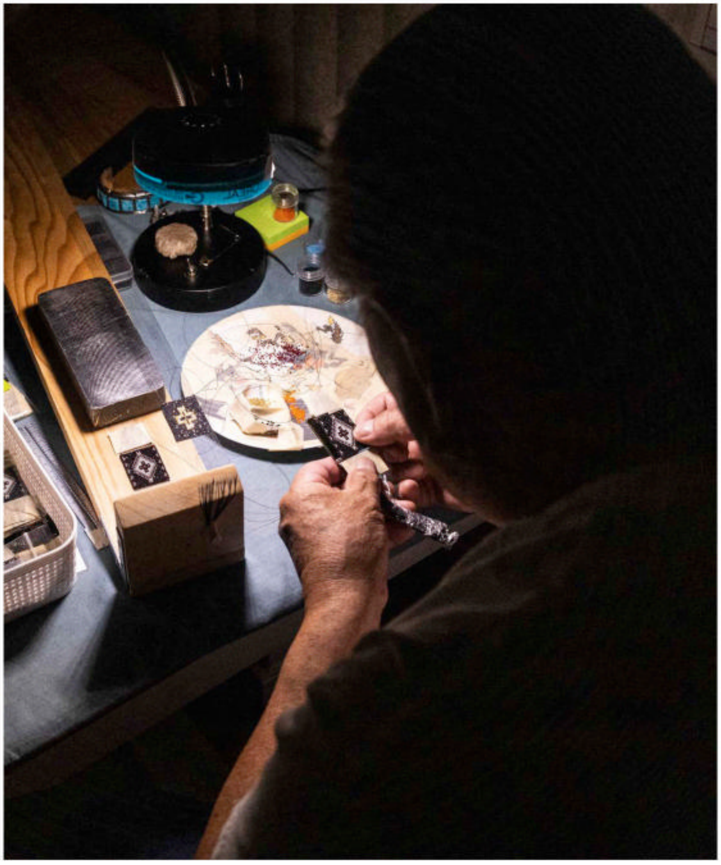

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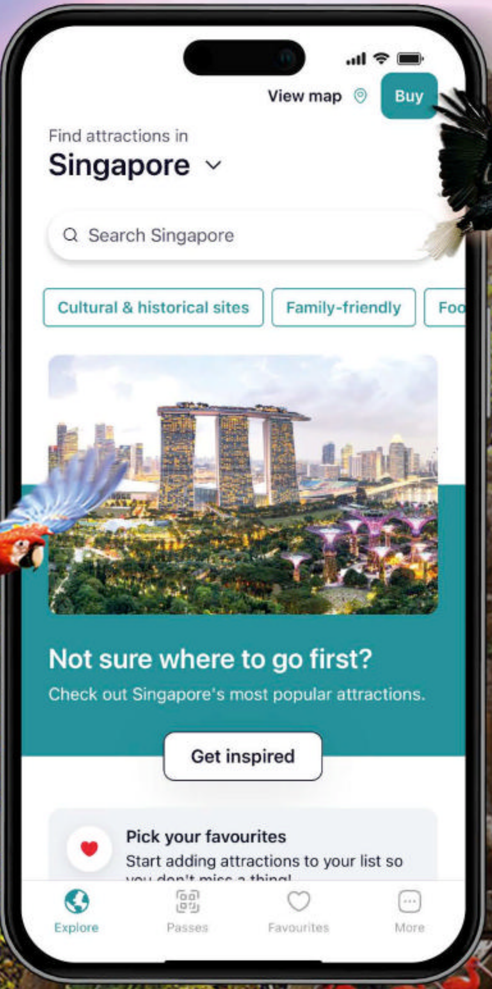

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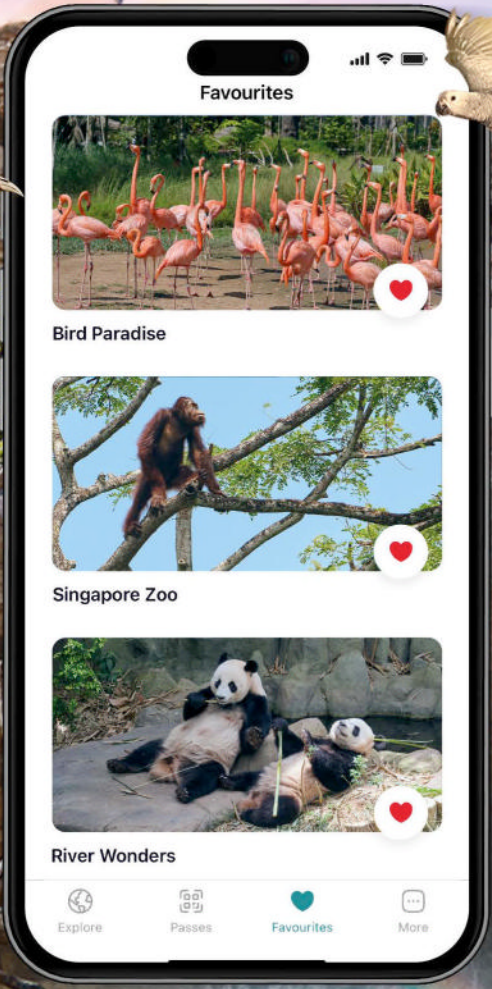

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IMAGE: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

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Traditional wooden longtail boat, Phang Nga bay, Thailand. Image: Getty

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CONTRIBUTORS

Karlina Valeiko

What I found in North Norfolk entirely exceeded anything I could have hoped for. Expansive beaches, endless skies and fantastic food welcomed me to this somewhat underrated corner of East Anglia — it was pure escapism. **NORTH NORFOLK P.44**

Ben Lerwill

Hiking in the High Atlas is as much about the people you meet as the paths you're walking — although, in the early summer, the scenery is extraordinary, with big, craggy mountains hulking over green valleys of walnut trees and woodpeckers. **MOROCCO P.84**

Adrian Phillips

With the recent opening of the Pelješac Bridge, you can now drive uninterrupted along Croatia's Dalmatian coast. It's a trip through a region with fascinating stories, spanning everything from medieval pirates to an underwater winery. **CROATIA P.98**

Annapurna Mellor

On blissful Andøya island, I hiked under the midnight sun, walked across windswept beaches and hung out with reindeers. But the highlight was meeting the locals, who each year spend weeks searching for a berry they refer to as 'Arctic gold'. **NORWAY P.110**

Alicia Miller

The first time I visited Los Angeles, all I saw was the Hollywood glitz. It was amazing to find a new side to it. Delving into the city's roots gave me a real flavour of the place, especially when it revealed a heritage most visitors are unaware of. **LOS ANGELES P.136**

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THE MARIANAS
Where Wonders Abound

The Marianas
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The Marianas is an archipelago of 14 islands in the Western Pacific. Saipan is the largest island in the archipelago. Home to the Indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian people, the Marianas feature white sandy beaches, turquoise lagoons and coral reefs throughout the isles. Ancient stone monoliths, traditional ocean navigation not reliant on modern technology, and cultures seasoned by Eastern and Western influences are just a few of the experiences found in The Marianas. International resort hotels, outstanding restaurants and luxury boutiques provide visitors an eclectic selection of entertainment and accommodations. If you're an adventure seeker, there are many options to choose from in this tropical destination, including sky diving, trekking, jet-skiing, parasailing, scuba diving, cultural encounters and more.

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Editor's letter

ISSUE 116, OCTOBER 2023

You don't need to have visited Thailand to know its allure — the spectacular beaches, limestone rock formations, jungle-clad mountains and clamour of Bangkok. Its food, ubiquitous across the UK, needs little introduction.

While visitor numbers have grown enormously over the past 20 years — with a slight pause due to the pandemic — the country still retains much of the appeal that first drew travellers to this Southeast Asian kingdom.

Whether it's hiking through rainforest, kayaking into sea caves and cliff-backed lagoons, diving or snorkelling among fish-filled coral reefs or simply escaping to a wellness retreat for a traditional massage, Thailand is rich in experiences.

This issue, we seek out some of the more unusual and intriguing journeys to be taken in the 'Land of Smiles'. In the south, explore the low-carbon initiatives changing the island of Koh Mak, or pick an active adventure on one of Thailand's lesser-known islands, such as Koh Adang or Koh Hae. In Bangkok, discover ancient Thai recipes being reinterpreted for modern diners, and head to the north to find revived textile and artisan crafts in Chiang Mai, or try your hand at organic coffee farming with hill tribes.

Whether you're a first-time visitor to Thailand or an old hand, it's a destination that offers much more than you might expect.

Pat Riddell, editor

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DON'T MISS

TRAVELLER
JAPAN

Japan guide

In our Japan special, included with this issue, we highlight what makes the country a unique cultural destination for visitors — be it trying Kyoto's ancient tofu recipes or joining artisan workshops in Tohoku.

Travel Geeks

Join us on 9 November 2023 for our next live event, all about Tobago. Whether you're itching for adventure or looking for the best festivals, our expert panel will be helping you to unlock the island's treasures. **P.176**

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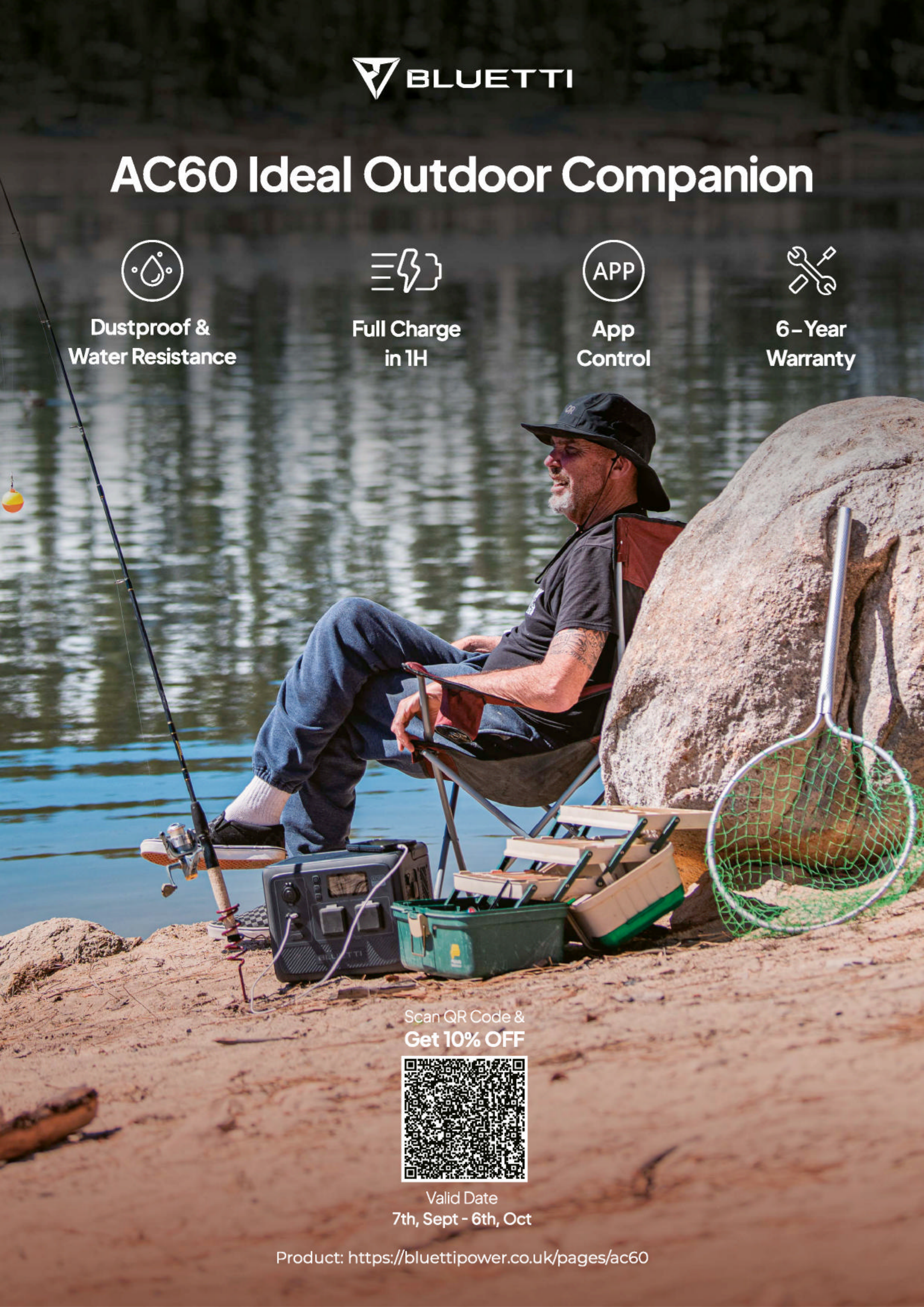

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SNAPSHOT

Dilshoda Ekhsonova Khodjaeva, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The Tashkent Metro is often described as the world's most elaborately decorated subway system. Each station has its own theme, showcasing elements of the history, industry and agriculture of Uzbekistan, with beautiful artwork to match. At Kosmonavtlar station, which is dedicated to Soviet-era space exploration, I met Dilshoda, who told me she'd been working in the Metro for three years. Her dedication to her duties meant I didn't have much time to capture her portrait, but between trains I managed a few frames — one with just a hint of a smile — before she got back to business.

RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR • PHOTOGRAPHER

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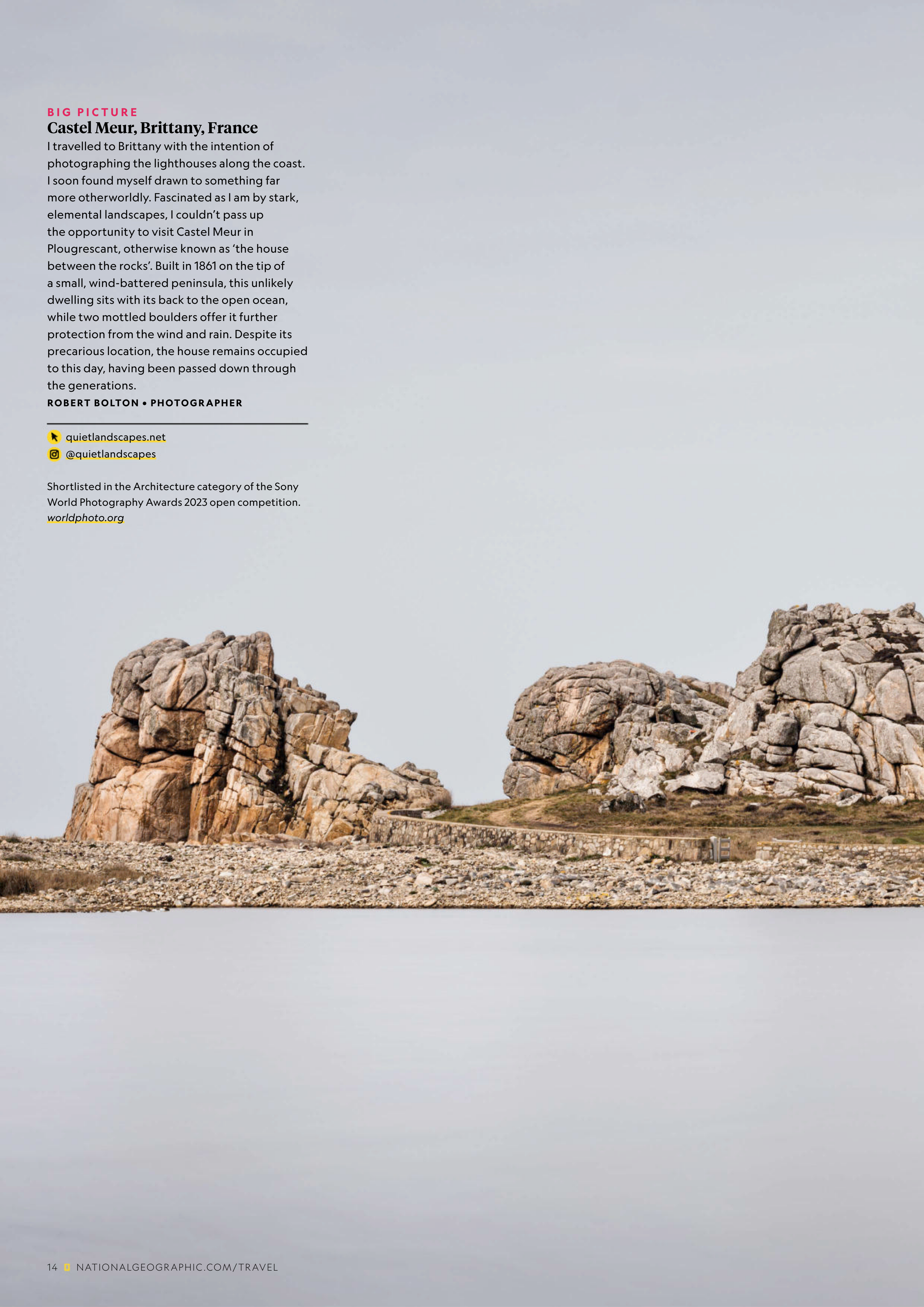

BIG PICTURE

Castel Meur, Brittany, France

I travelled to Brittany with the intention of photographing the lighthouses along the coast. I soon found myself drawn to something far more otherworldly. Fascinated as I am by stark, elemental landscapes, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to visit Castel Meur in Plougrescant, otherwise known as 'the house between the rocks'. Built in 1861 on the tip of a small, wind-battered peninsula, this unlikely dwelling sits with its back to the open ocean, while two mottled boulders offer it further protection from the wind and rain. Despite its precarious location, the house remains occupied to this day, having been passed down through the generations.

ROBERT BOLTON • PHOTOGRAPHER

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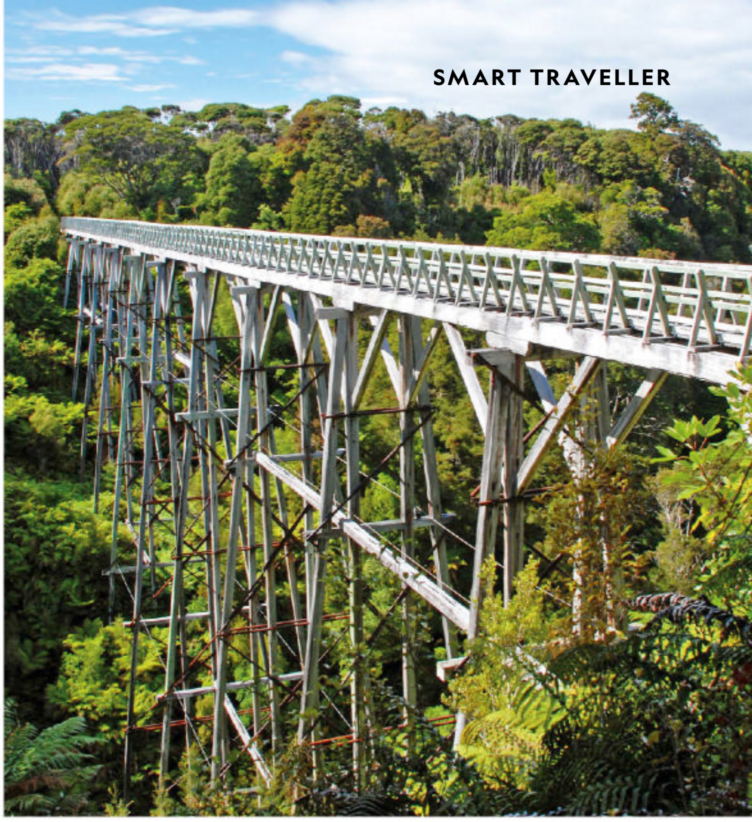

NEW ZEALAND

A new classic

A TRAIL WEAVING THROUGH A WILD COASTAL STRETCH OF THE SOUTH ISLAND IS SET TO JOIN NEW ZEALAND'S LIST OF GREAT HIKING ROUTES

New Zealand's southwest corner is where the roads run out — leaving some 4,500sq miles of forest, fjords and jagged mountain chains that make up the country's largest area of wilderness. Three of New Zealand's 10 officially recognised Great Walks take dedicated hikers through the northern interior of this region, along the Routeburn, Milford and Kepler tracks. Soon, the coastal south will get its recognition too, as the Hump Ridge Track becomes the newest member of the top league of Kiwi hikes.

The 38-mile route was originally opened in 2001, but works over the last few years have aimed to upgrade the path and facilities to a high enough standard for it to become the 11th Great Walk. These trails, run by the Department of Conservation, traverse a wide range of New Zealand landscapes and are popular enough that hikers often need to book slots to walk them. The improved Hump Ridge Track is due to open in time for the start of New Zealand's summer hiking season in November. The intermediate-level loop walk can be tackled in three days, including overnight stays at two backcountry lodges, perhaps under the beady eyes of a kea — an olive-green parrot known to enjoy picking at hikers' possessions.

While the trail reaches almost 1,000m amid the sub-alpine scenery of the namesake Hump Ridge, it's the views of long, deserted beaches along the Tasman Sea that set the experience apart from more vertiginous landscapes elsewhere in the Fiordland region. There are reminders, too, of sporadic attempts at development before logging was banned in the 1980s. The most impressive is the century-old wooden Percy Burn Viaduct. Although it was abandoned not long after opening amid a downturn in the timber industry, the tall bridge was restored to use five years ago and is a handy surprise to walkers emerging from the fern-choked forest on the edge of a deep valley.
humpridgetrack.co.nz doc.govt.nz **RORY GOULDING**

Ferns, such as these along the Abel Tasman Coast Track, are a New Zealand national symbol
Above: The Percy Burn Viaduct on the Hump Ridge Track is one of the world's largest wooden viaducts

THREE FAVOURITE NZ GREAT WALKS

TONGARIRO NORTHERN CIRCUIT

The volcanic heart of the North Island provides a bleakly impressive setting for a 28-mile loop around Mount Ngauruhoe — a stand-in for Mount Doom in the *Lord of the Rings* films. Part of the route is shared with the Tongariro Alpine Crossing day-hike, a stretch that includes the eye-popping Emerald Lakes.

ABEL TASMAN COAST TRACK

Near the northern end of the South Island, Abel Tasman National Park isn't actually in the tropics, though you'd think so from its golden beaches, turquoise seas and thickly forested hills. A 37-mile one-way walking route traces the coast past waterfalls, across swing bridges and among thickets of tree ferns up to 20m tall.

ROUTEBURN TRACK

You climb high and stay high on this 21-mile tramp across the Humboldt Mountains, part of the Southern Alps between Queenstown and Milford Sound. Once above the tree line, on day two of the three-day walk, the path hugs the mountain shoulders, with soul-stirring views of the braided rivers in the valley far below.

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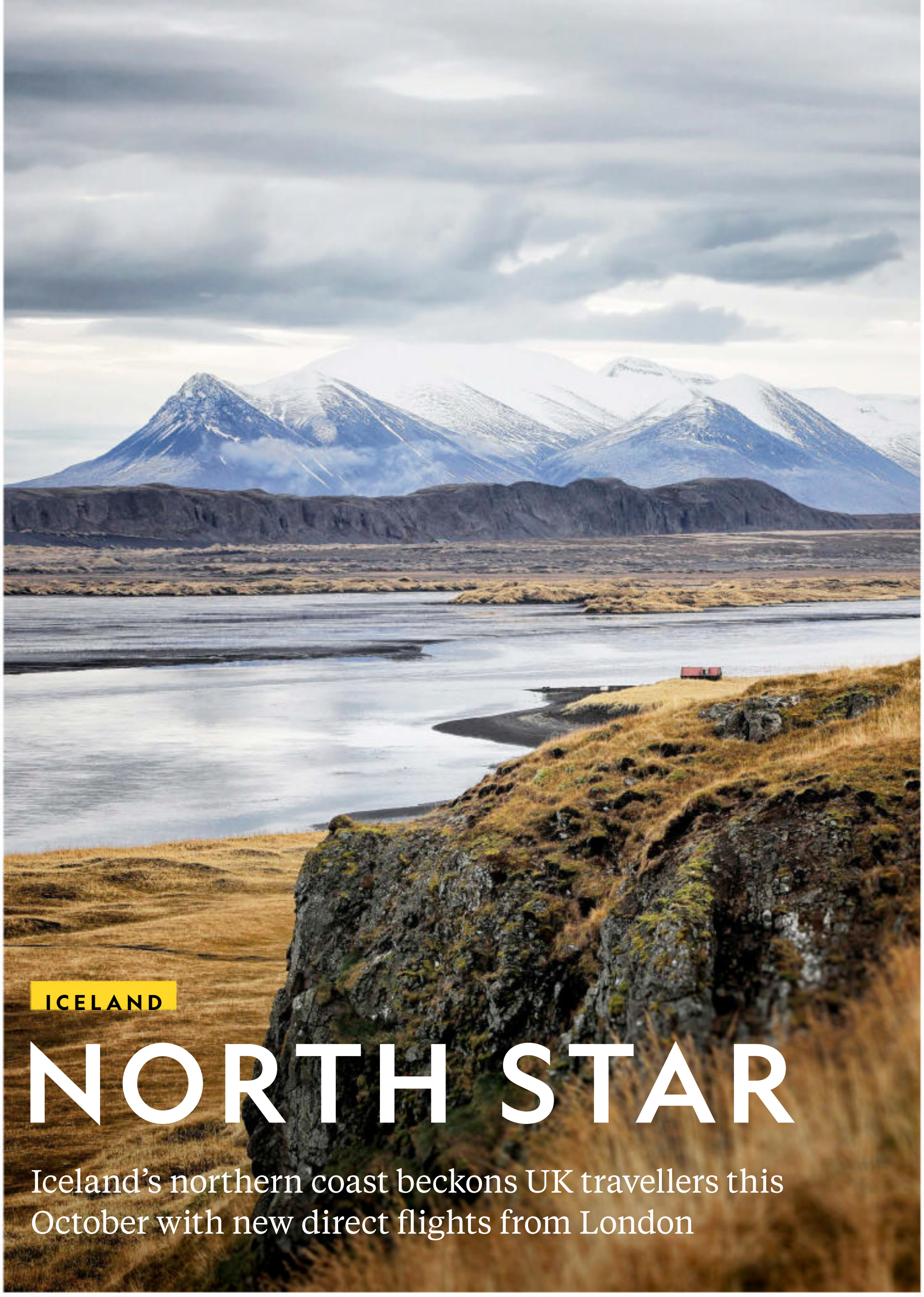


ICELAND

NORTH STAR

Iceland's northern coast beckons UK travellers this October with new direct flights from London

A moonscape of volcanic craters, lava fields and belching thermal pools, northern Iceland is as starkly elemental as the country gets. The region has remained little known to UK visitors, partly due to its remoteness — until now, reaching it usually meant a five-hour drive from the capital Reykjavík or a 40-minute connecting flight. This stretch of the country's wild coast is coming into the limelight this autumn thanks to scheduled direct flights with EasyJet, set to take off on 31 October. Operating on Tuesdays and Saturdays, the long-awaited service will link Gatwick to Iceland's second city of Akureyri in two and a half hours, bringing visitors to the doorstep of Laufás's turf-roofed houses and the edge of the mighty waterfall of Goðafoss. Tour operator Discover the World has also introduced an Adventure in North Iceland tour — a four-night, self-drive trip that includes volcanic Lake Myvatn and the colourful fishing village of Siglufjörður. visitakureyri.is northiceland.is discover-the-world.com **ANGELA LOCATELLI**

Clockwise from top: The scenery of northern Iceland near Hvítserkur; zip-lining in Akureyri; Siglufjörður, on the Trollaskagi peninsula

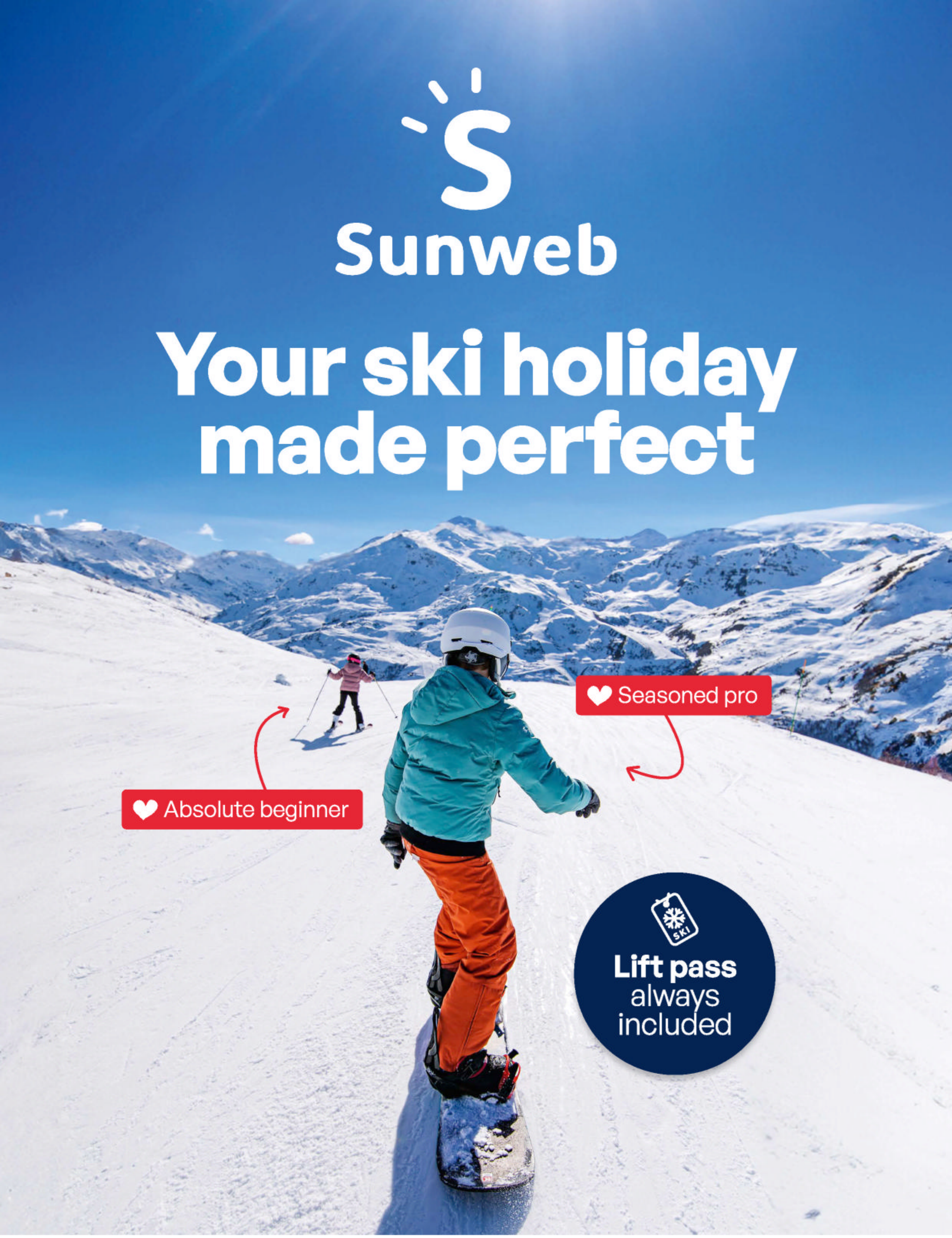
IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY; JON HEIDAR RUNARSSON

Just launched

FOREST BATHING
The Forest Lagoon gave northern Iceland a destination spa when it opened last year in Vaðlaskógur. All natural wood and ancient basalt, the complex is surrounded by birch and pine trees — an exciting location for a country where woodland is rare to come by. Soak in the infinity pool, which sources geothermal water from nearby mountains and overlooks the Eyjafjörður, one of the country's longest fjords. forestlagoon.is

NEW ACTIVITIES
Adventure seekers have long gravitated to northern Iceland's wild landscapes, and recent openings provide more thrills. Localtours ATV Iceland offers excursions in all-terrain vehicles around the north of Vatnajökull National Park, from birdwatching tours to seal-spotting trips. Or opt for a zip-line experience in Akureyri, with five runs whizzing across Glerárgil canyon. localtoursatv.com ziplineakureyri.is

DESTINATION HOTELS
Hotel Blönduós — in the town of the same name — marked its 80th anniversary this year with a facelift. One of Iceland's oldest lodges, its rooms now sport rich colours, and there's a suite in a former church next door. Looking ahead to 2024, Höfði Lodge is set to open on the cliffs of the Eyjafjörður. With a rooftop bar, spa and heliskiing, it promises to become northern Iceland's first luxury hotel. hotelblonduos.is hofdilodge.com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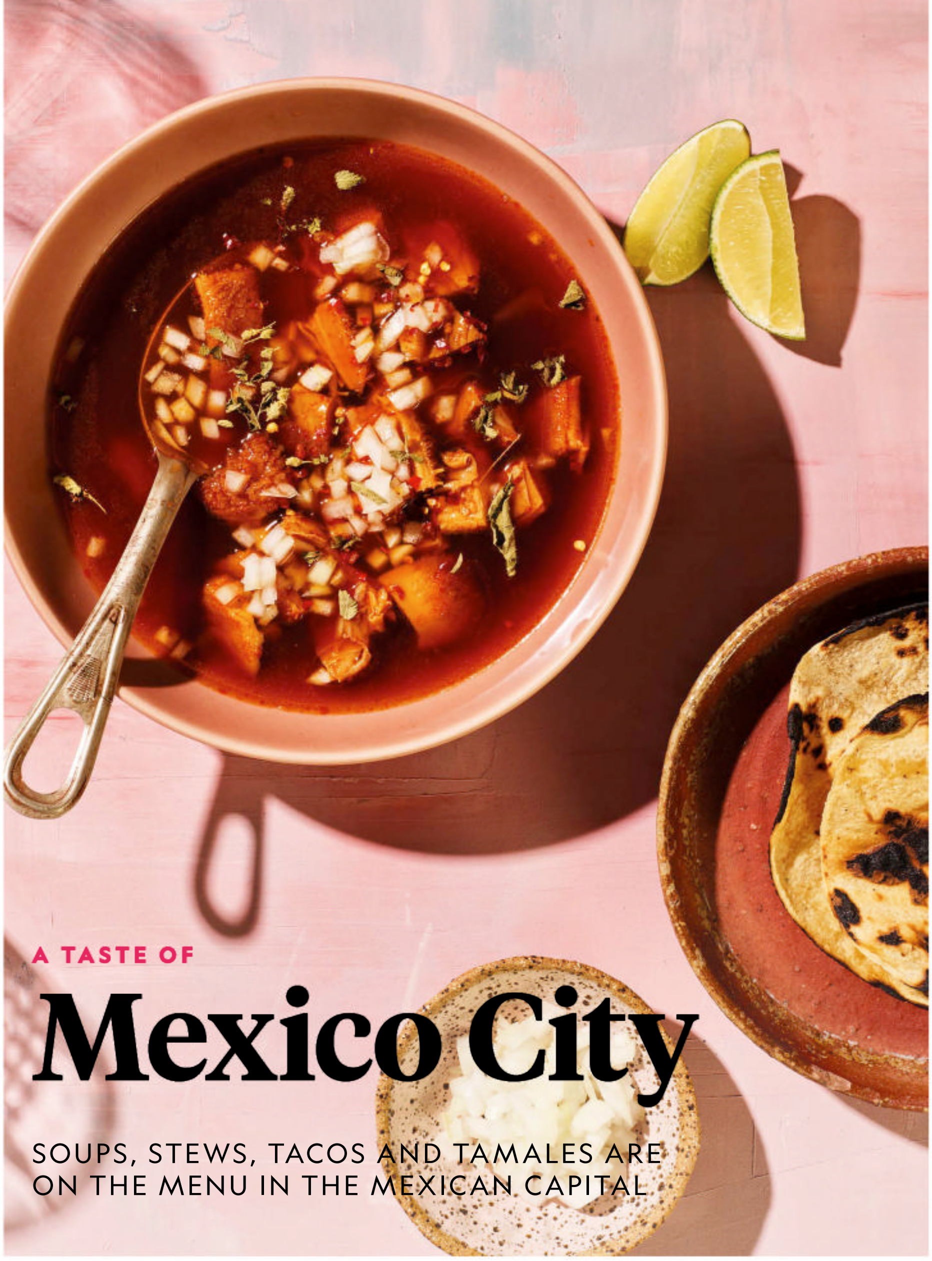


A TASTE OF

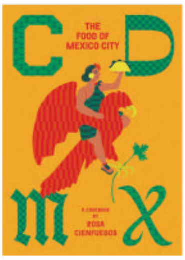
Mexico City

SOUPS, STEWS, TACOS AND TAMALES ARE ON THE MENU IN THE MEXICAN CAPITAL

Every time I go back to Mexico City, the city where I was born, I think of staying. There are so many dishes to try, and not enough nights to dance, drink or eat an *elote* (corn on the cob) on a street corner.

The importance of not leaving home on an empty stomach comes from our ancestors and our *abuelitas* (grandmothers), who lived through hunger during the Mexican Revolution. But we have street breakfast vendors, too. The star option is the *guajolota* — a *tamal* (steamed corn dough) inside a bread roll. You can find dishes from every Mexican state in the capital, but this is a local speciality — it's delicious, cheap and filling.

Tortillas are on the table every day, freshly made by the local *tortilleria* from early morning until 5pm. Different tacos are sold at particular times of day. *Tacos de guisado* (with stew) are commonly seen from morning to lunchtime; street-style tacos are enjoyed mainly at night; *carnitas* (slow-cooked pork) or *mixiotes* (pit-barbecued meat) are a midday sort of taco; while *barbacoa* (meat slow-cooked over fire) are a weekend-morning taco.



Lunch is usually a larger meal, with soup, rice, beans, a main dish and tortillas, then dessert — served as a *comida corrida*, a sort of set meal. It's cheap, fast and often served in *cocinas economicas*, small humble restaurants. Every market has its own food court, plus stalls selling local ingredients, juices or fresh brews, seafood, desserts and *garnachas* — fried tortillas with refried beans and garnishes such as cheese and shredded cabbage.

Cantinas, meanwhile, are similar to pubs. The main activity is drinking, but free food is a drawcard. Some cantinas serve small plates of food to nibble on; others have a proper menu where you can order *pancita* (tripe soup), *birria* (meat stew), *caldo de camaron* (shrimp soup) and more. There will often be live music, karaoke or mariachi bands, too, so you can spend the day eating, drinking and singing.

This is an edited excerpt from CDMX: The Food of Mexico City, by Rosa Cienfuegos, published by Smith Street Books on 12 October (£26).

WHERE TO EAT

LA BLANCA CAFÉ

In the heart of the city, this is a charming family restaurant whose walls are lined with pictures from 1915. Enchiladas or *chilaquiles verdes* (corn tortillas fried in salsa verde) are served in substantial portions, but save room for some sweet bread and a café con leche. cafelablanca.com

EL CANTO DE LAS SIRENAS

Living up to the allure of its name ('Siren Song'), this restaurant offers a seafood experience that combines delicious dishes with a fun atmosphere and live music. Add the coastal decor and you'll feel transported to the sea, despite being right in the middle of the city. elcantodesirenas.com

LA ESPECIAL DE PARIS

Established in 1921, this ice cream parlour offers almost 30 flavours on its seasonal menu of scoops, from classics such as vanilla to more unusual offerings including mandarin, pecan and *zapote* — a sweet and creamy local fruit. Insurgentes Centro 117-B San Rafael, Cuauhtémoc

Left: Pancita is a traditional tripe soup

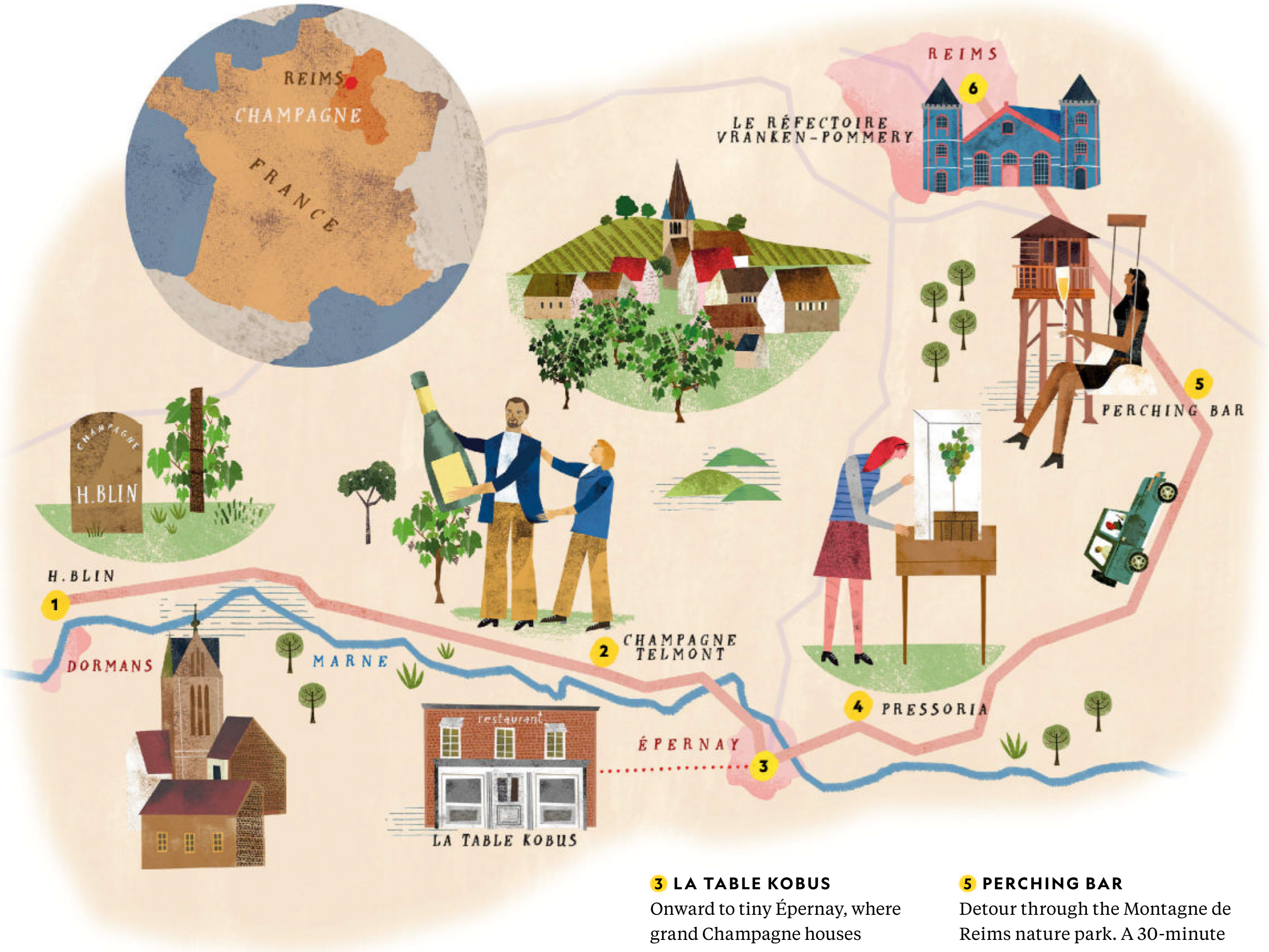
Essential ingredient

Nopales (prickly pears) play a crucial role in Mexican cooking, adding a mild, tangy flavour and tender texture to dishes like salads, juices, stews and tacos

ROSA CIENFUEGOS is chef-owner of two restaurants in Sydney and the author of cookbooks including *CDMX*

IMAGES: ALICIA TAYLOR

SCOTTSDALE
ARIZONA
AbsolutelyScottsdale.com
the desert is
WILD



ON THE TRAIL

CHAMPAGNE

Tradition meets innovation in this verdant winemaking region, where hallowed tasting rooms pair well with treehouse bars

1 H. BLIN

Pick your designated driver and start the day with a trip through the Marne Valley, famed for its vine-clad slopes. At Vincelles, the fields part to reveal a Roman road and this revered Champagne house, which has been producing a range of organic wines since 2013. In good weather, the Blin family welcomes visitors for tastings in a hilltop setting, gazing out over the landscape with a glass from the 10,000-bottle cellar. champagne-blin.com

2 CHAMPAGNE TELMONT

Follow the river to Damery where you'll find the modernist Champagne Telmont compound, run according to sustainable principles by its president Ludovic du Plessis. You can book tours of the cellars here, enjoy drinks at the bar or sample a food and wine pairing menu at the communal table. Look out for the photographs of Ludovic with Leonardo DiCaprio, who's invested in Telmont's green initiatives. champagne-telmont.com

3 LA TABLE KOBUS

Onward to tiny Épernay, where grand Champagne houses like Perrier-Jouët and Moët et Chandon lord it over the Avenue de Champagne. Stop for lunch at this smart bistro, where you'll find a menu of terrines and fricassées. Corkage is free on weekdays (or €12/£10 from Friday evening to Sunday), so you can take a bottle of Champagne picked up on your travels. Alternatively, order a €25 (£22) half bottle from the wine list. la-table-kobus.fr

4 PRESSORIA

Stop at the sleepy town of Aÿ, with half-timbered cottages on its cobbled main street. In 2021, the old pressing centre here was transformed into a sensory Champagne museum. Visitors are invited to experience a virtual wine harvest, explore rooms scented with blossom, 'press' their own vintage and watch the fermentation process on IMAX-style screens. The exhibition ends in the tasting room, overlooking vineyards. pressoria.com

5 PERCHING BAR

Detour through the Montagne de Reims nature park. A 30-minute drive into wild terrain will bring you to a forested path and wobbly suspension bridge — the only way in or out of this treehouse wine bar. With hanging armchairs and Champagne buckets strung from the ceiling, it's the perfect spot to watch the sun go down with a glass. Ask for a plate of *biscuits roses de Reims* — a pink biscuit traditionally served with Champagne. perchinglife.com

6 LE RÉFECTOIRE VRANKEN-POMMERY

Your final stop is the Vranken-Pommery estate, a collection of gothic towers on the road to Reims. You can tour its ancient Champagne cellars then stay for dinner in the dining room in the old refectory, which stays open late. Try the risotto with leek fondue with a glass of one of Pommery's more affordable bruts (€15/£13). Finish with profiteroles. vrankenpommery.com

ELLEN HIMELFARB

ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

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CAIRNS, AUSTRALIA

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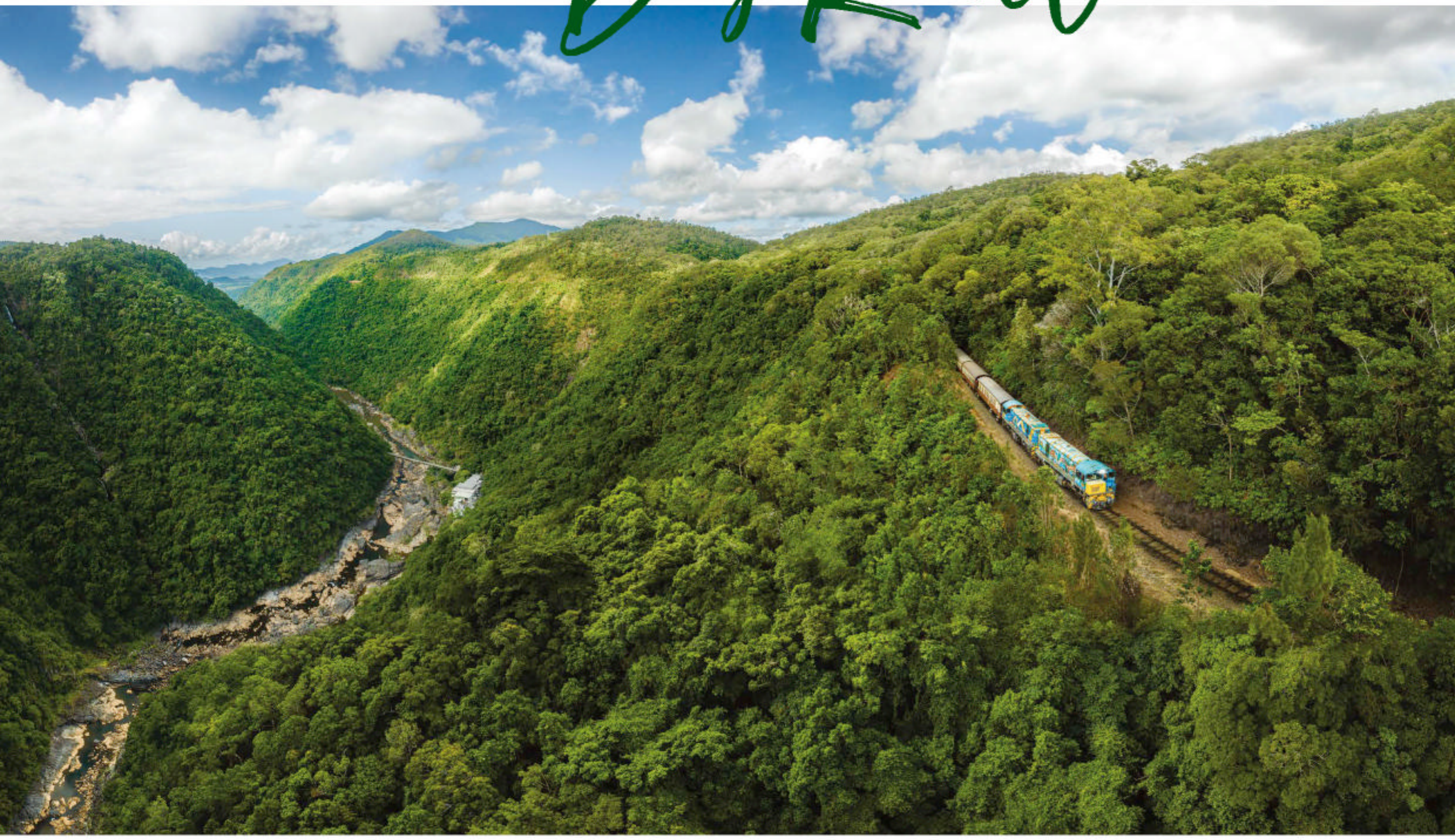

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WHERE TO STAY

Margate

NEW OPENINGS PROVIDE PLENTY OF REASONS TO VISIT THIS REGENERATED KENT COASTAL TOWN

No 42 by GuestHouse

Margate doesn't stay still for long. A streak of seaside nostalgia runs through the Kent town, but this is a place with its focus squarely on the future. Take Dreamland, a retro-themed pleasure park that draws visitors to its vintage carousel and scenic railway (Britain's oldest roller coaster) as much as its Pride celebrations and a newly installed Banksy mural. Around the bay, modern art exhibitions rotate through the Turner Contemporary gallery, while kids play with buckets and spades on the beach in its shadow. New openings butt up against the resort's kiss-me-quick attractions, and nowhere is this more apparent than along the seafront. Amusement arcades and shops selling inflatables squeeze in between microbreweries and cocktail bars, and restaurants serve both cod and chips and miso-battered tofu.

It's here that you'll find Margate's newest hotel: No 42 by GuestHouse occupies a handsome Victorian building overlooking Main Sands beach. Highlights include a rooftop bar with far-reaching views along the coast, a ground-floor spa and an elegant, light-filled restaurant serving dishes that make good use of local produce. The 18 bedrooms celebrate the local area, too, with prints and fabrics by Margate artists and vinyl for the record players from nearby music shop Ghost Papa. Proving that some things never change on a British seaside break, rooms come with beach towels for when it's sunny, and umbrellas for when it's not. From £149. guesthousehotels.co.uk/no-42-margate

The Albion Rooms

The decor at The Libertines-owned Albion Rooms is best described as 'rock 'n' roll gothic': some leopard print here, a skull ornament there, plus heavy fabrics and dark walls in the bedrooms. It's a convivial place, with guests likely to end up chatting in the bar, perhaps speculating about the identity of the band recording in the hotel's music studio. From £137. thealbionrooms.live

Fort Road Hotel

When it opened in 2022, this boutique hotel brought a dash of pared-back, mid-century modernism to Margate. The 14 rooms feature Danish lighting, locally made Haeckels toiletries and plenty of wood. Be sure to check out the Tracey Emin hanging in the candlelit bar, watch the sun set from the rooftop terrace and have a seasonally focused meal in the restaurant. From £136. fortroadhotel.com

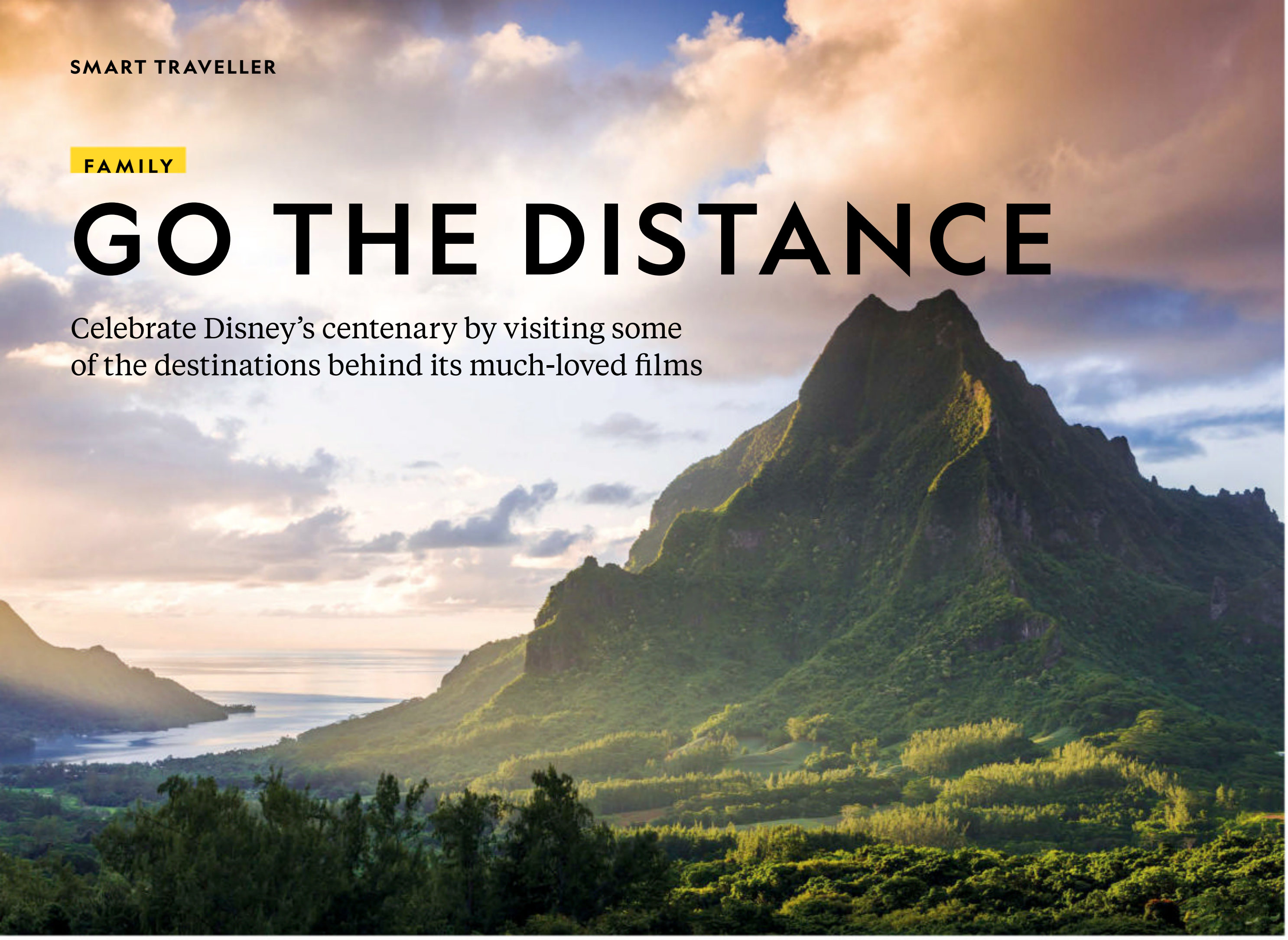
Margate House

In an immaculately restored Victorian house, this newly opened pad is filled with intriguing objects, from 1970s Italian dining chairs to vintage Polish posters. Guests are encouraged to make themselves thoroughly at home, whether relaxing with a drink from the honesty bar or tucking into a breakfast hamper in bed. From £115. margatehouse.co.uk

AMANDA CANNING

Clockwise from above: A guest room at No 42 by GuestHouse; sunset over Main Sands; the lounge at Margate House

ALL RATES QUOTED ARE FOR STANDARD DOUBLES, ROOM ONLY, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. IMAGES: TOBY MITCHELL; ALAMY; BOZ GAGOVSKI



FAMILY

GO THE DISTANCE

Celebrate Disney's centenary by visiting some of the destinations behind its much-loved films

Above: Moorea island, French Polynesia. The South Pacific region inspired Moana

Disney movies can act as the perfect inspiration for family travel, highlighting lesser-known destinations as a possible location for the next trip — Colombia in the Oscar-winning *Encanto*, for example, and the South Pacific in *Moana*. With the studio marking its 100th anniversary this October, there are new ways to get inspired. Start with *Disney100: The Exhibition*, running at ExCeL London from 13 October 2023 and celebrating the centenary through 10 interactive galleries of memorabilia. It gives the whole family a chance to revisit their favourite Disney flicks — and, through them, some of the real-life destinations that inspired their beloved storylines. disney.co.uk excel.london

Frozen and Frozen II (2013 and 2019)

The fictional kingdom of Arendelle, home to sisters Anna and Elsa and the rest of the *Frozen* cast, was inspired by the landscapes of Norway. The country is a perennial winter favourite with families, especially its far north. Here, the Arctic capital of Tromsø is a good bet for spotting the Northern Lights, while Finnmark — the Norwegian part of Lapland — offers the chance to meet the Indigenous Sami people and enjoy reindeer sleigh-rides, dog sledding and snowmobile safaris.

THEME-PARK ATTRACTIONS: At Florida's EPCOT theme park, visitors sail past scenes inspired by the *Frozen* films. Stage performances of the stories take place at Disney's Hollywood Studios — also in Florida — and Paris's Walt Disney Studios Park. The first entirely *Frozen*-themed area is set to open in Hong Kong in November, with similar experiences in the works at Disneyland Paris and Tokyo DisneySea. disneyworld.co.uk disneylandparis.com tokyodisneyresort.jp

Moana (2016)

The tale of a girl lured from her island by adventures at sea, *Moana* was inspired by the history and culture of the South Pacific. Scenes of atolls and green volcanic peaks came from Polynesian and Melanesian islands such as Tetiaroa, Fiji, Samoa and Moorea. Fiji alone has over 300 islands, with miles of white-sand beach, coral reefs and rainforest perfect for a castaway trip. Its two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, have compact but multicultural cities, too, with markets and heritage sites to discover between activities in the wild.

THEME-PARK ATTRACTIONS: The first *Moana* attraction at a Disney park — a trail where kids can play with water at all stages of its journey from sky to sea — is scheduled to open at EPCOT by the end of the year.

Encanto (2021)

This recent classic puts the spotlight on Colombia — not an obvious family destination but one worth considering for its mix of Andean peaks, Amazon rainforest and Caribbean beaches. Lovers of the film will have noticed its nods to the country's biodiversity, and visitors can discover natural wonders in habitats such as Tayrona National Park, home to black howler monkeys and elusive jaguars. Hiking, sea kayaking and snorkelling are all on the agenda, and for rides and shows, make for the Parque del Café amusement park in Quindío, which celebrates the country's coffee-growing heritage.

THEME-PARK ATTRACTIONS: While the movie doesn't have a dedicated Disney area yet, an *Encanto* meet and greet is set to open at Magic Kingdom Park in Florida by the end of 2023, and plans have been mooted for a future attraction there, too. **RHONDA CARRIER**

IMAGE: GETTY

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INSIDE GUIDE

MUNICH

COMBINING HIP BAKERIES, CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES AND EMERGING DISTRICTS, GERMANY'S THIRD-LARGEST CITY HAS A YOUTHFUL SPIRIT

The appeal of the Bavarian capital extends well outside its ornate historic centre — and beyond Oktoberfest season. Buzzy neighbourhoods like Schlachthofviertel put modern Munich's creativity on show, stylish coffee shops and bakeries set you up for the day, and sprawling parks have helped to build the city's liveable reputation.

Start with brunch at **Café Faber**, a former pop-up that found a permanent home along the Isar River earlier this year. The menu changes with the seasons, but you can always expect to see plenty of kimchi, hummus and fresh sourdough. From here, make your way to the old town, where speciality-coffee gurus **Sweet Spot Kaffee** will sort you out with another caffeine hit. sweetspotkaffee.de

In this neighbourhood, you'll find homegrown businesses among the usual high street names. Founded by a mountain enthusiast in 1913, **Sport Schuster** has outdoor gear spread across seven floors as well as an indoor climbing wall. For loftier heights, head to **Frauenkirche**, the city's largest church. Following a decade of restoration, you can now ascend one of its gothic towers; after making your way up a narrow spiral staircase, a lift will take you to some of the most spectacular views in the city. sport-schuster.de

You shouldn't leave this part of town without seeing what's on at the **Kunsthalle München**, an exhibition space whose three annual shows tackle subjects as diverse as the art of the samurai and the work of Jean Paul Gaultier. Further north, **Museum Brandhorst** has a collection of works by American painter Cy Twombly that have made it an important address for contemporary art. kunsthalle-muc.de museum-brandhorst.de

Starting to get peckish? A big name on the bread scene, **Julius Brantner** supplies several top restaurants and has two uber-stylish bakeries, one in the Altstadt (Old Town) and another to the north in Schwabing. Pretzels filled with butter are a popular choice but you'll find plenty of sweet options, too. julius-brantner.de

For a bigger meal, **Augustiner Bräustuben** serves hearty German grub, while meat-free options can be found at nearby **Bodhi**, the city's first and best vegan pub. Both establishments are in Westend, a neighbourhood that has changed significantly in recent years with the arrival of hip hangouts such as speciality roasters **Stray Coffee**. braeustuben.de bodhivegan.de stray.coffee

Nearby **Theresienwiese** is worth a visit year round. When not hosting the annual Munich Oktoberfest, the 100-acre site is used by locals for recreation — you might even spot the occasional windskater. More expansive greenery can be found at **Englischer Garten**; its sun-dappled beer gardens are perfect places to sample the city's celebrated brews.

Away from the regal architecture of the city centre, the Schlachthofviertel (Meatpacking District) is another area that's constantly evolving. As well as traditional butcher shops and old-school watering holes, it's home to a thriving local craft beer scene and new cultural spaces. Run by one of Munich's young brewers, kiosk-style **Bierkiste** has fridges full of regional bottles to drink in or take away. A few streets down, the graffiti-covered train carriages and shipping containers of **Bahnwärter Thiel** host artist studios, workshops and events. At the weekend, techno DJs move in. bierkiste-muenchen.de bahnwaerterthiel.de

Come dinnertime, try a Bavarian take on the Japanese *izakaya* (pub) at **Ciao Chang**. Standout dishes include local trout with teriyaki sauce and ramen with duck and red cabbage. For something extra special, there's **JAN** in the museum district — it became Munich's only Michelin three-star restaurant just a year after opening in 2022, thanks to chef Jan Hartwig's art-like tasting menus.

Round off the evening with a cocktail and tropical vibes at **The High** bar before resting up at aparthotel Schwan Locke. Otherwise, opt for the minimalist yet cosy **Haus im Tal** hotel in the heart of town. ciaochang.de jan-hartwig.com lockeliving.com hausimtal.com **KATE MANN**

LIKE A LOCAL

Franziska Linhardt's cultural finds

Franziska Linhardt is a curator at Museum Brandhorst in Maxvorstadt museum-brandhorst.de

FUTURO HOUSE

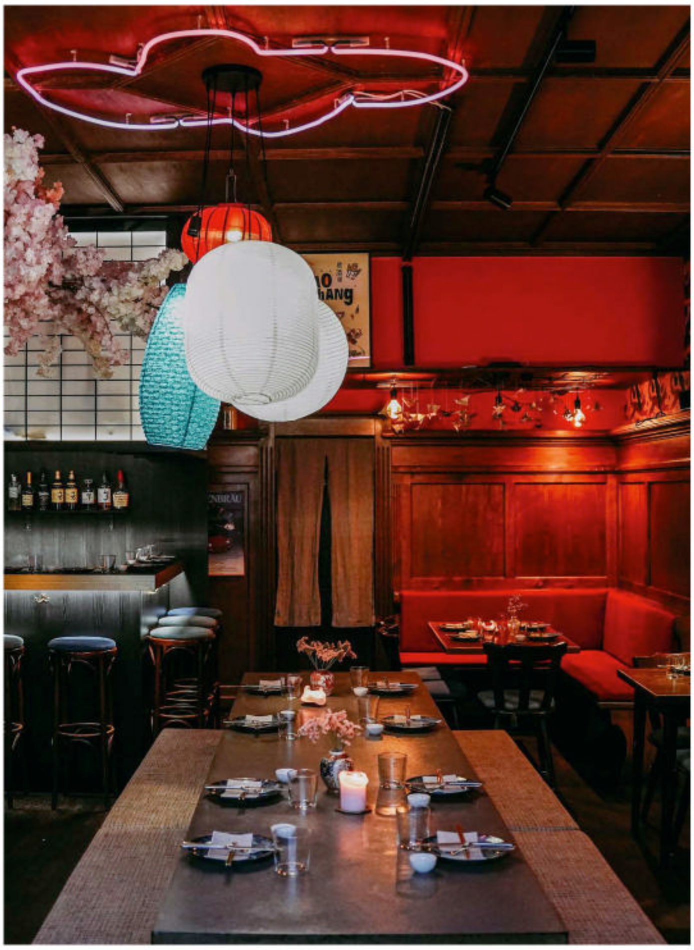
Perched on the lawn of the Pinakothek der Moderne museum, this pod by architect Matti Suuronen is a must-see for design enthusiasts. Dreamt up in 1968 as a ski chalet, it looks more like a UFO. dnstdm.de

GOLDENE BAR

Inside Haus der Kunst museum you'll find a bar with a terrace overlooking the Englischer Garten. It's also next to a popular surf spot on the Isar River, where you can watch locals ride the waves. goldenebar.de

ZIRKA

Zirka has been Munich's liveliest cultural hub since 2022. It's home to co-working spaces and artist studios, and it also hosts a variety of concerts, performances and readings. zirka.space



Dessert served at JAN restaurant
Clockwise from left: Hofbräuhaus am Platzl, a landmark of Munich's old town ; Ciao Chang restaurant; a swing carousel in action at Oktoberfest

IMAGES: MANUEL NIEBERLE; CIAO CHANG; PIETER D'HOOP; GETTY

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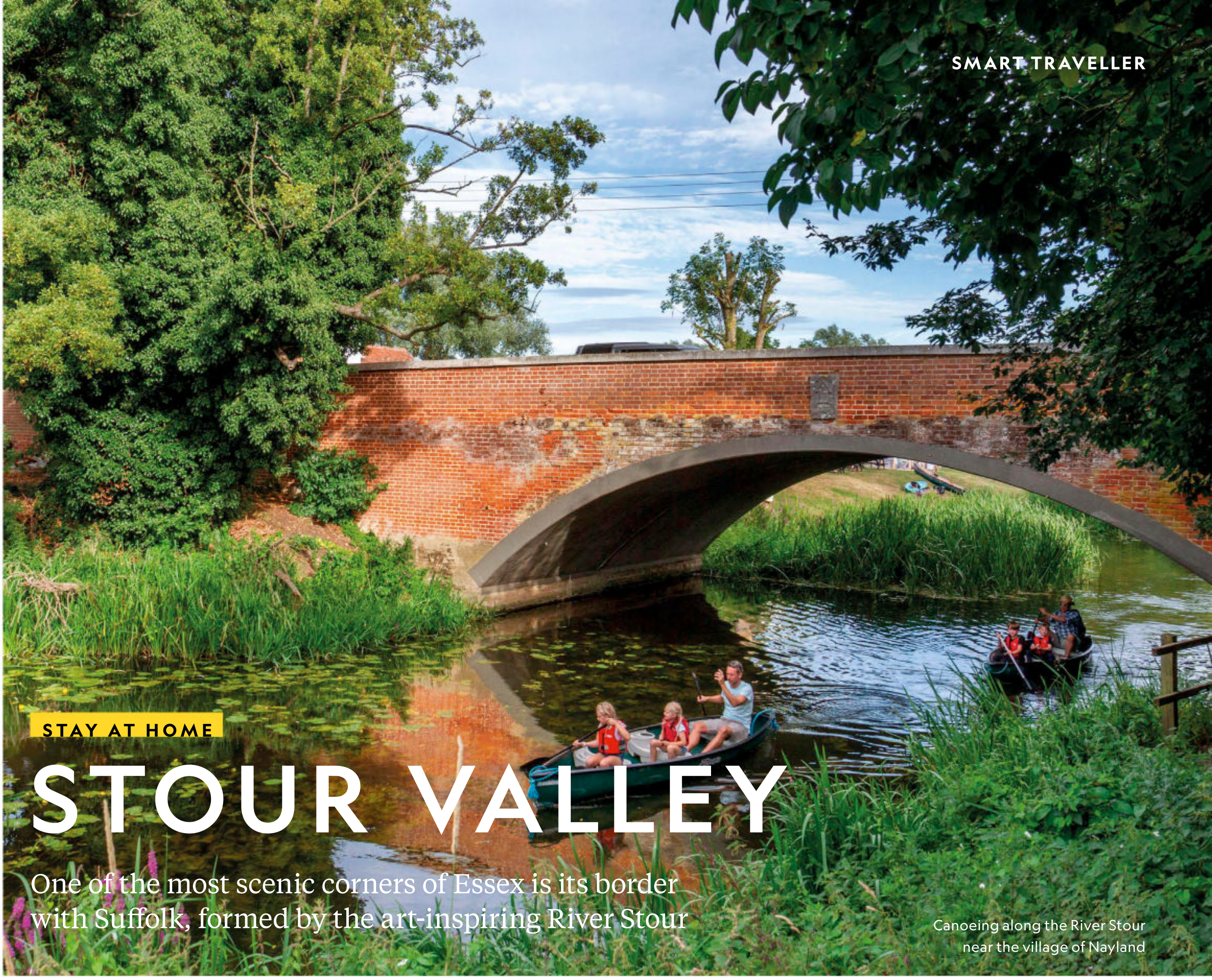

STAY AT HOME

STOUR VALLEY

One of the most scenic corners of Essex is its border with Suffolk, formed by the art-inspiring River Stour

Canoeing along the River Stour near the village of Nayland

Why go

The beauty of the River Stour and its valley has long attracted artists, not least John Constable, whose paintings gave the area its 'Constable Country' sobriquet. This slice of Essex and Suffolk countryside, with its mills, vineyards and walking trails, continues to inspire to this day. In Dedham, one of its most popular villages, the Art & Craft Centre has work from over 60 artisans and collectors for sale; to get involved, join a painting course at the 15th-century manor house of Dedham Hall. dedhamartandcraftcentre.co.uk dedhamhall.co.uk

What to do

Leave plenty of time to explore the area's network of walking routes. Starting out from Dedham Vale is a good bet — its trails are easy to follow. Stop off in Dedham to hire a clinker rowing boat, part of a fleet that's been seen here since the 1800s. Also in Dedham is the Munnings Art Museum, the former home of artist Sir Alfred Munnings. It holds the world's largest collection of his work, with 650 oil paintings, 50 watercolours and 54 sketchbooks showcasing the painter's fascination with horses. dedhamvalestourvalley.org munningsmuseum.org.uk

Where to eat

Talbooth Restaurant is a must, all white tablecloths and wooden beams; outside, a riverside terrace and lawn are very welcome on a warm day. The menu uses local ingredients and presents them in creative dishes such as Mersea crab tartlet with preserved lemon and pickled radish, or Dedham Vale beef with boulangere potatoes. milsomhotels.com

We like

The RSPB Stour Estuary is an unusual mix of woodland and water. It's wilder than the lowlands of Dedham Vale, and there's great birdwatching to be had, especially in autumn and winter. Keep an eye out for black-tailed godwits, pintails and brent geese. When the weather warms, come for butterfly spotting and bluebells in Copperas Wood. rspb.org.uk

Don't miss

Flatford Mill is where John Constable painted The Hay Wain, one of the most recognisable rural scenes in the history of English painting. Willy Lott's House, the mill and The Granary can all be viewed from outside, looking almost exactly as they did when the artist immortalised the view in 1821. nationaltrust.org.uk **JO FLETCHER-CROSS**

WHERE TO STAY

About nine miles from the small city of Colchester, The Sun Inn in Dedham feels very 'country'. On warm post-walk afternoons, repair with a drink to the back garden of this historic coaching inn, or settle into a candle-lit nook after a hearty meal. Upstairs, seven guest rooms are individually decorated, some with mantelpieces and skylight windows. Doubles from £150, B&B. thesuninndedham.com

IMAGES: ALAMY; OLIVER SUCKLING

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BOOKS

Writing from home

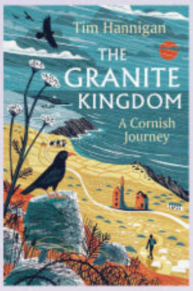
HAVING LIVED ALL OVER THE WORLD, AUTHOR AND TRAVEL JOURNALIST TIM HANNIGAN TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO HIS NATIVE CORNWALL

My earliest writing as a child was almost always about my own Cornish environment, and I think that was really what set me off down the travel-writing path. When I started writing professionally, it was about far-off places, mainly in Asia, but I always had a hankering to write about the place that mattered most: home. I just wasn't sure how to go about it.

Writing about your home region is a strange and daunting experience for a travel writer. It's impossible to be dispassionate, and you'll probably worry more than usual about how readers will react. It's also likely to mean asking uncomfortable questions about yourself and your own identity — it certainly did for me.

I took a 300-mile walk through Cornwall for the book, and what surprised me most was how alien many parts of it seemed to me. I realised that for my whole life, I'd been conflating 'Cornwall' with 'home'. All the things I'd thought of as representing Cornwall as a whole were really only representative of my bit of it, in the far west. The journey helped me to stop thinking of Cornwall as a single, unified place.

I tried to keep away from the coast as much as possible. Inland, Cornwall is spectacularly well provided with footpaths — though many of them are little used. I could easily, I feel, repeat my whole journey using different paths along different valleys and have a completely different experience.



I'm always biased in favour of my own section of Cornwall, Penwith. It has a huge variety of landscapes and a vast amount of tangible history and prehistory crammed into one tiny peninsula. But the other area I'd urge people to visit is the Clay Country near St Austell — one of the most radically altered industrial landscapes in Britain and worlds apart from all the cliched images of Cornwall.

Cornwall has been attracting travellers for hundreds of years, and part of the appeal has been its ambiguity. It's technically a part of England — though some Cornish people are unhappy about that — but at times, it feels quite separate. I think that peculiarity — not quite foreign, not quite domestic — is still a draw today. It also plays into the way Cornish people feel about themselves.

There are a lot of contradictions in popular perceptions of Cornwall. It's a major holiday destination and, at the same time, one of the most deprived areas in Western Europe. It's rugged and rural, but also one of Britain's major post-industrial landscapes. It's a mysterious Celtic otherworld that's also intimately linked to the far corners of the world through historical networks of trade and emigration. It's a fairly small place but it contains so much.

Tim Hannigan is the author of The Granite Kingdom: A Cornish Journey, published by Bloomsbury Publishing, £27.99.

The Cornish Alps, china-clay spoil tips, situated north of St Austell, Cornwall

IMAGE: ALAMY

KIT LIST

SAFARI

Enjoy the experience of a lifetime in comfort and style with this list of essentials for heading out into the bush

1 TROPICFEEL MEN'S ZIP-OFF PANT
Clothing in neutral shades can elevate your game-spotting chances by helping you blend in with the bush. These trousers have also been created with versatility in mind, with a zip-on leg to combat insect bites and many pockets in which to keep bug spray and other small essentials. £119. shop.tropicfeel.com

2 KEEN NXIS EXPLORER WATERPROOF BOOT
Part of Keen's clever NXIS hiking range, the Explorer is a great companion for bush walks thanks to its cushioned midsole, all-terrain outsole and high-traction tread. The fit also leaves nothing to chance, securing the heel while creating space for the forefoot to spread out. Each sale supports a range of not-for-profit initiatives. £160. keenfootwear.com

3 ROYAL ROBBINS WOMEN'S EVOLUTION JOGGER PANTS
Largely made of recycled plastic bottles, these women's joggers in everglade green will keep you comfortable during long drives thanks to their light, stretchy and breathable fabric. For more active pursuits, the moisture-wicking material's stain-release technology and UPF protection are sure to come in handy, too. £80. cotswoldoutdoor.com

4 THULE CHASM BIG 70L DUFFEL BAG
This soft-shell with internal pockets is two bags in one: large grab handles make it easy to throw on and off vehicles, while removable shoulder straps convert it into a backpack, useful when walking longer distances. Swedish outdoor specialist Thule is part of the Bluesign system, which aims to reduce the negative impact of manufacturing. £130. thule.com

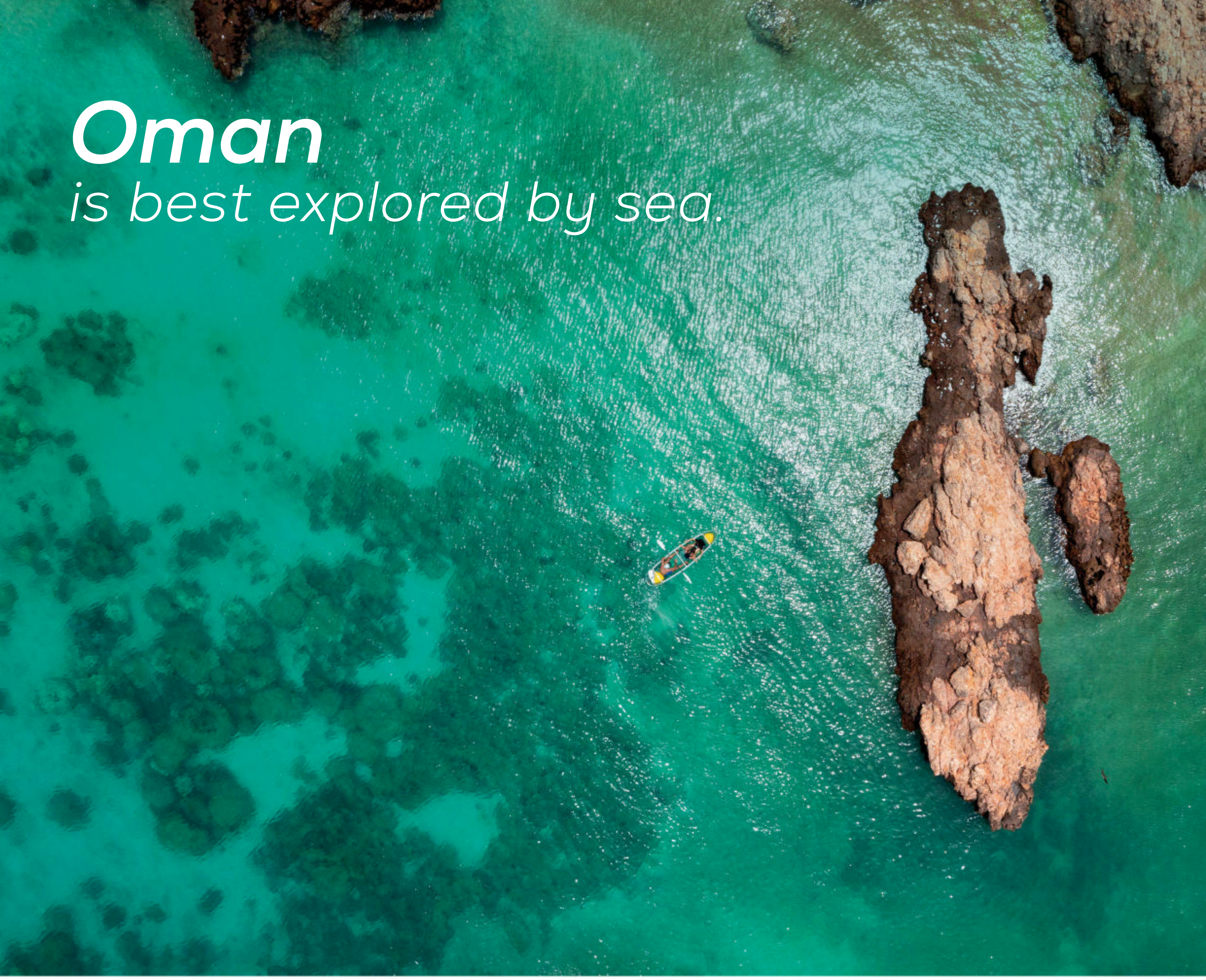
5 PATAGONIA HOUDINI JACKET
At just 100g, Patagonia's classic windbreaker is ultralight. And while features are kept to a minimum to achieve this weight, it remains protective against wind and rain. With a zip-up pocket that converts into a stuff sack, it's the ideal safeguard against sudden weather changes. £100. eu.patagonia.com

6 FJÄLLRÄVEN RÄVEN 28
With smart details including zip-up inner pockets, spacious compartments and an interior webbing loop for attaching extra gear, this 28L backpack has enough room for a hat, water bottle, sunscreen and much more. Its hard-wearing, water-resistant fabric is designed to last for life, while the padded air mesh back panel also ensures comfort in hot weather. £120. fjallraven.com

7 LIFESYSTEMS INTENSITY 545 LED HAND TORCH
Some camps have limited electricity, meaning a reliable light source is a must. This LED torch offers a solid level of brightness, five lighting modes and an adjustable beam covering 45 to 200 metres. The pocket-sized device is both water- and drop-resistant, while the rechargeable battery lasts up to 16 hours. £44.99. lifesystems.co.uk

8 NIKON MONARCH M5 8X42
Enjoy every last detail of your safari with these waterproof and fog-free binoculars that deliver excellent optics for the price — bright, sharp images with little distortion. The lightweight, durable body of just under 6in in length has an ergonomic, portable design, and its field of view of 335ft at 1,000 yards is suitable for safari. £329. nikon.co.uk

ANGELA LOCATELLI



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A TRIP FOR TWO TO SOMABAY, EGYPT

National Geographic Traveller (UK) has teamed up with Somabay to offer a winner and their guest a four-night luxury escape to the Red Sea

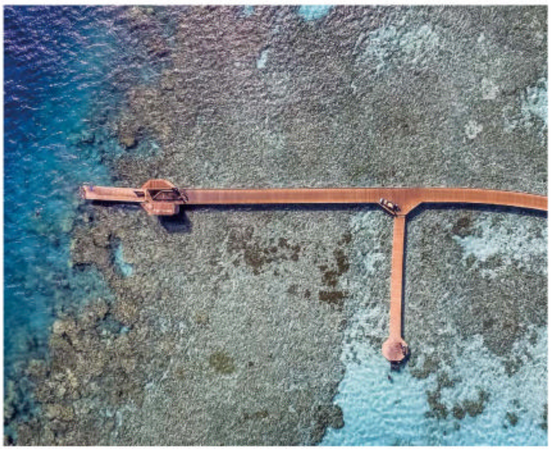
THE DESTINATION

Lapped by the Red Sea on three sides, and with sandy beaches and views of desert mountains to boot, Somabay is a place for sun-drenched relaxation. Spread across almost 2,500 acres, the Egyptian resort has an 18-hole golf course designed by golfing icon Gary Player, as well as the largest thalasso spa in Africa. Kitesurfing, diving and horse-riding are all on offer, too, as is sailing from the Somabay Marina. somabay.com

Of Somabay's five accommodation options, five-star The Cascades Golf Resort, Spa & Thalasso enjoys a fantastic location on the highest point of the Somabay peninsula. It has 159 guest rooms and suites with private balconies, as well as four on-site restaurants — enjoy beachside pizza, take afternoon tea with panomaric views, or stop for a drink by the 18th hole. thecascadeshotel.com

THE PRIZE

Courtesy of Somabay, the winner and a guest will enjoy a four-night stay in a classic room at The Cascades Golf Resort, Spa & Thalasso on a half-board basis. The prize includes return economy class flights with overhead cabin luggage from the UK to Hurghada International Airport up to the value of £650 per person, with direct routes available from cities including London, Manchester and Bristol, plus return airport transfers to Somabay (UK transfers aren't included). Blackout dates apply.



From above: Somabay Marina; The Cascades Golf Resort, Spa & Thalasso; the jetty at Somabay

TO ENTER

Answer the following question online at natgeotv.com/uk/competitions:

ON WHICH SEA IS SOMABAY LOCATED?

Competition closes on 31 October 2023. The winner must be a UK resident and aged 18 or over. Full T&Cs at natgeotv.com/uk/competitions

SOMABAY

IMAGES: SOMABAY

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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR

BETH LEWIS

Off-grid camping in British Columbia gave the author a lifelong love of the Canadian wilderness in all its vast, uncontainable beauty

I don't remember when my love of Canada began — it's something that's always been there, this connection to a country that feels like a second home even though I haven't spent longer than a month there in one go. I grew up by the sea in Cornwall and planned to study marine biology and live out on the water, researching whales and sharks. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, my lack of scientific aptitude quickly put paid to that idea, but the love of nature remained and has been an anchor in my life and in my writing.

Canada is a special place. It's vast, majestic and wild but also friendly, fun and diverse in its landscape — from peaceful hills and lakes in the east through flat golden prairies, rising up to the awe-inspiring Rocky Mountains, then down to the coast, where mountains and rainforests meet the sea. I travelled there by myself at the age of 20, planning to spend my 21st birthday camping, kayaking with killer whales and hiking in the forests.

I woke on my birthday in a tent on the edge of the water. It was quiet, the other campers not yet awake. I watched the sun rise, turning a black sky blue, and the water from gun-metal grey to shining silver. Behind me, the trees of this largely untouched wilderness loomed — cedars and spruce, hemlock and pine. The smell of the dense, ancient forest mingled with the salty tang of the sea. It filled my lungs and gave me a sense of calm I've rarely found since.

I was on an island in the middle of the Johnstone Strait, the slice of water between mainland British Columbia and Vancouver Island. It's a magical area of the world. A narrow sea, just a couple of miles wide, it holds dozens of islands, coves and inlets, and in the summer is home to over 100 orcas, as well as whales, dolphins, eagles and bears. In my time there, I saw them all and in abundance.

Bears combed the beaches, cubs in tow. I watched from the relative safety of a kayak as a mother bear turned over rocks looking for clams and crabs, snuffling peacefully on the shoreline, before disappearing into the forest. Had I arrived a few minutes later, I'd have landed on the beach for a break and not known there was a bear and her cub just beyond the treeline.

That moment of realisation, that I was a few minutes, seconds even, away from potential danger, and that there could be anything hiding in these dense, beautiful forests, made me understand how small I was, and how powerful and how unforgiving Mother Nature could be. Needless to say, I didn't land on that beach but found another not far away — though who's to tell what had been roaming the shore before I arrived?

At first glance, the landscape seemed impenetrable. Endless carpets of pointed trees reached right down to a thin sliver of rocky shore. It seemed there was no way in. This wilderness held its secrets close. It was a land full of myth, a story to every island, a dozen more old tales waiting in the trees. Stepping from the beach into the forest, I immediately sensed the history of the area — it felt ancient, and it was impossible not to be humbled.

With a guide for safety, I hiked a few miles through the wilderness to the top of a bluff where there was a wildlife conservation station. This area of Canada is part of the protected Great Bear Rainforest, a haven for wildlife and the only place in the world to find the rare spirit bear, a subspecies of black bear that has a white coat.

Under the tree canopy, a verdant stillness overcame me. The sounds of the forest were everywhere. I could hear the songs of a dozen different birds in the branches. Insects buzzed and chirped. Something bigger moved through the undergrowth and my guide stopped dead. Listened. My heart was in my mouth and I dared not move.

Then, after some invisible signal, my guide relaxed, and we went on. For a writer who admittedly has an overactive imagination, I wondered what that animal had been, how close it had come and what it might have done for weeks after.

We continued the hike and emerged onto a cliff with the most stunning view I've ever seen. From terror to wonder in only a few hundred steps. It was that sense of unsettled ground — of shifting emotion, secrets and awe, beauty and fear — that's fed my writing across four books, none more so than *Children of the Sun*, and instilled in me a lifelong love of the wild.

> “I could hear the songs of a dozen different birds in the branches. Insects buzzed and chirped. Something bigger moved through the undergrowth and my guide stopped dead. Listened. My heart was in my mouth and I dared not move

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Children of the Sun by Beth Lewis is published by Hodder, £20. @bethklewis

ILLUSTRATION: JACQUI OAKLEY

MEET THE ADVENTURER

Georgina Miller

THE BRITISH FREE-DIVING CHAMPION ON HER FAVOURITE DIVE DESTINATIONS AND FINDING PEACE BENEATH THE WAVES

IMAGE: DAAN VERHOEVEN

Why did you start free-diving? I've loved swimming ever since I was a kid. Before taking my first free-diving course in 2007, I was a scuba instructor in Thailand. One day, we were exploring a shipwreck and I saw this lady swim down from the surface using only a monofin, which is a swimfin you attach to both feet. I thought, 'I'd love to be able to do that!' At first, it was just a hobby. It was only when I began to realise the importance of sharing my knowledge with others that I knew I wanted to pursue it professionally.

You've since broken the national record for static apnea six times and set a personal best of seven minutes. It's funny being good at a sport that involves lying completely still, but it can quickly become very physically demanding. When you're holding your breath, the most important thing is to stay calm. You need to understand yourself, know your physiology and have a good safety team around you. Deep diving has far less certainty because the pressure you experience is huge. My best depth is 215 feet, which isn't very deep when you think about the women who reach 390 — that's seven and a half atmospheres' worth of pressure!

Is it ever scary? It's all about relaxation and meditation, so I find it very peaceful — not like scuba diving, where you can put yourself in danger quite easily. Humans are well suited to holding their breath underwater — we've been doing it for millennia. Many tribes [such as the Bajau people of Southeast Asia] still free-dive to forage for food and pearls.

When it comes to free-diving in open water, what's your favourite destination? My partner and I have just come back from Mexico, where we were exploring underground lakes. Some are hundreds of feet deep and they're just spectacular. In terms of my favourite spot for depth training, though, Dominica in the Caribbean is hard to beat. Sadly, it's difficult to find deep enough water close to home — much of the North Sea is only about 130 feet, which is a beginner's depth.

What about a stand-out experience? On that same trip to Mexico, we were out diving when we spotted a pod of humpback whales. They normally cruise along but, in this instance, they were resting at the surface. You obviously have to be incredibly respectful of the animals and not disturb them, but to have such a great view was amazing. They were vocalising, too, and that's a sound you feel deep in your chest.

How has the sport changed since you started? In terms of the number of people doing it, free-diving has changed radically. When I was starting out, it was quite difficult to find places to learn, but things are much more developed now. My partner and I moved to Cornwall from London to be closer to the sea and we set up a free-diving school here in 2015. We're very close to the Atlantic, so instead of the rough, murky waters you get in southeast England, it can sometimes look a bit like the Caribbean — only much, much colder.

What advice would you give to someone starting out? Take a course with a certified instructor: there's no substitute for having somebody knowledgeable teach you about techniques and safety drills. It's a very safe sport when practised properly but can be fatal when not. There are a surprising number of diving schools in the UK, so even if you can't come to a lovely destination like ours, you should be able to find something fairly close by.

What would you say is your proudest achievement? You feel proud when your training pays off, when you make it to a competition and set a personal or national record, but that's not necessarily the motivating factor. For me, it's all about community. My proudest moments have been helping students overcome something they've been struggling with. Free-diving can be inward-looking, but it's also a team sport. It's the people around you that keep you going. **INTERVIEW: ANGELA LOCATELLI**

Georgina Miller and her partner Daan Verhoeven run Aquacity Freediving, offering free-diving courses for all levels at the Porthkerris Divers centre in Cornwall.

aquacityfreediving.com @aquacityfreediving

READ THE FULL INTERVIEW ONLINE AT NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM/TRAVEL

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WHAT'S ONLINE

THE BEST WILD SLEEPS IN ENGLAND & WALES

From a simple stone bothy in Eryri (Snowdonia) to a back-to-basics pitch in Leicestershire, here are a few of the best places to bed down in nature. Words: Sian Anna Lewis

CHALLACOMBE MEADOWS, DEVON

Best for: privacy

If you have a self-contained campervan, you can book a private pitch thanks to Wild With Consent. The booking platform grants access to secluded sites where the permission from landowners has already been given. Challacombe Meadows, in Devon, is one of the finest options available on the website. It's close to miles of walking trails in Dartmoor National Park, and you can set up by the edge of a field full of wildflowers. Basic toilet facilities and running water are a short walk away, and there's a cosy pub and a farm shop nearby, too. From £45 per vehicle. wildwithconsent.com

FIRE & STARS, LEICESTERSHIRE

Best for: going back to basics

Fire & Stars, a quiet woodland site halfway between Birmingham and Nottingham, has just 12 peaceful pitches across 47 acres of wild forest. As the site's name suggests, it's a place that's best experienced in the amber glow of a campfire, with the night sky unfurling above. This is a true back-to-basics camping option — there are toilet facilities, but you'll need to bring your own drinking water, as well as anything else you might need. Some of the profits are redirected back into the upkeep of the woodland. From £50 per pitch, accommodating up to six people. hipcamp.com

PENRHOS ISAF BOTHY, GWYNEDD

Best for: packing light

Bothies — simple huts traditionally used as mountain refuges that are open to all and usually free of charge — may be more commonly associated with the Scottish Highlands, but there are plenty dotted around northern England and Wales. They're a great alternative to wild camping if the weather is looking unstable and you don't mind sharing. Penrhos Isaf, in the foothills of Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon) in Eryri National Park (Snowdonia National Park), is among the best — a charming stone farmhouse equipped with a wood-burning stove, for free use. mountainbothies.org.uk

READ MORE ONLINE

TOP STORIES

Here's what you've been enjoying on the website this month

CANADA

Iceberg-chasing in Newfoundland

Each year, hunks of glaciers drift to Canada's east coast. Social media is helping more travellers find them

US

National parks going green

Some of the country's wildest areas are trying to go carbon-free. Find out how to support their mission

ITALY

The 'Path of Love' reopens

After a decade of restoration, new rules encourage responsible visits to Cinque Terre's iconic trail

THE STORY OF GERMANY'S FAVOURITE FAST FOOD

CURRYWURST, A SPICY SAUSAGE DISH, IS ENJOYED AS A MIDNIGHT SNACK, TAKEAWAY LUNCH AND MORE. WORDS: TOM BURSON

Germany and curry make for an unlikely pair. This is a country most famous for colossal cuts of pork served with potatoes. Many people here consider black pepper to be a spicy flavour. And yet currywurst (sliced sausage topped with a tomato sauce and flavoured with spices including yellow curry powder and paprika) has been a German favourite for more than half a century. You'll find versions sold for around €4 (£3.40) at casual food stands and haute cuisine interpretations served in fine restaurants costing €25 (£21) and paired with Champagne.

Currywurst is the fuel served in factory canteens; politicians have posed with it; there are pop songs dedicated to it and festivals celebrating it. So how did it come to be?

Origins

It seems currywurst was born of post-war circumstance: the main ingredients — ketchup and curry powder — were introduced to local pantries during the Allied occupation. The most common iteration of its origin story dates back to 1949, when Berlin kiosk-owner Herta Heuwer concocted 'chillup' (a portmanteau of chilli and ketchup) out of boredom.

Ingredients

Heuwer took her original recipe with her to the grave, but this simple dish is open to improvisation. At its heart, the sauce is tomato-based. From there, it's all about the spices, the most essential being curry powder.

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I HISTORY I

What really caused the collapse of the Maya civilisation?

Power struggles? Overpopulation? Drought? Whatever happened to the Maya remains a mystery — though clues can be found deep in the Central American jungle. natgeo.com/history

I ENVIRONMENT I

Iceland has entered a new volcanic era

The country's volcanic peninsula has been dormant for centuries, but experts say the tectonic shifts behind recent earthquakes and eruptions have been a long time coming. natgeo.com/environment

I ANIMALS I

How Niassa Special Reserve gives locals a stake in its success

In Mozambique, one of Africa's largest wildernesses is thriving. Here, people revere baboons, birds guide honey hunters and elephants are making a comeback. natgeo.com/animals

ALGERIA

Museum of prehistoric art

In the country's desert, al fresco galleries provide a dazzling record of ancient civilisations

SAILING

Six destinations for beginners

A roundup of some of the most scenic places where novice sailors can learn the ropes and hoist sails

IRELAND

Top 10 not-to-miss activities

From exploring sea caves to taking an underground yoga class, these are definitive Irish experiences

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NORTH NORFOLK

Home to seals, rare birdlife and some of Britain's best seafood restaurants, this part of East Anglia offers a peaceful break, with a coastal landscape of sand dunes and salt marshes. Words: Karlina Valeiko

Drawing visitors since the 1700s, North Norfolk has long been a place of escapism. You arrive ready to fill your lungs with sea air and let your gaze drift to the horizon. The natural beauty here is not the kind that smacks you in the face and overwhelms with superlatives. The expansive beaches, endless skies, fenland and watery network of the Broads are a more subtle tonic for the soul — you don't have to work too hard to forget life beyond this somewhat overlooked patch of East Anglia.

It's also a place to get closer to wildlife. Many of the salt marshes in Norfolk offer some of Britain's best birdwatching, while seals love to sunbathe on the shingle spits at Blakeney Point. Plus, there's bluebell and snowbell carpets in spring, dragonflies buzzing over lavender fields in summer and woodland ablaze in ochre, yellow and red in autumn.

Beyond the pull of its natural attractions, North Norfolk is dotted with stately homes, sliced through by heritage railways and framed by historic towns. Add it all together and you have a region that promises the kind of serenity many search far and wide for, yet few expect to find so close to home.

DAY ONE BEACHES & BIKES

Morning

Head for the region's most famous stately home, Holkham Hall. Its 25,000-acre estate is best explored on two wheels. Hire a bicycle or e-bike and follow one of the multiple signposted trails. The six-mile red route takes you past the Church of St Withburga, along the Walled Garden and up the hill to the Temple, a neo-classical folly hidden by woodland. It ends at the hall itself. Inside, guides share stories of the 18th-century home's tapestries, paintings and furniture, as well as residents past and present. Afterwards, grab a table at The Victoria, owned by the Holkham Estate. The menu showcases local ingredients, with veg from the Walled Garden, meat from local farms, and fish, shellfish and samphire from the coast. holkham.co.uk

Afternoon

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the town of Wells-next-the-Sea and its beach are a must-visit in any season. With soft sands and colourful higgledy-piggledy huts lining the shore, it has a serious claim as one of Britain's best beaches. Plop yourself in the sand for the afternoon, if the weather allows, or stroll along the shore to the dunes covered in beach grass and gorse. Keep an eye out for rare breeding birds, such as pied avocets and marsh harriers, which wade through the marshes between the forest and the dunes. Trace your way back by following the path inland, filling your lungs with the scent of pine. As you head into town, nab a seat at one of the picnic tables at the Beach Café for coffee and cake. wellsguide.com

Evening

Watch the sun set at Sheringham Park, a landscaped thousand-acre National Trust site with over 80 species of rhododendrons and azaleas. The Repton route leads to a gazebo; it takes some effort to climb the steps to the viewing platform but it's worth it for the views that unfurl in front you: a green mosaic of pastures and farmland to the west, a wall of thick woodland to the south and the blue expanse of the North Sea sparkling ahead. Wrap up the day with a meal at The Gunton Arms, stopping to observe the deer that roam freely in the surrounding park, and then head to bed in one of its elegant guest rooms, filled with William Morris prints and antique furnishings. nationaltrust.org.uk theguntonarms.co.uk

IMAGES: GETTY; HOLKHAM ESTATE

TOP THREE

Heritage railways

NORTH NORFOLK RAILWAY

Steam engines on the 5.5-mile-long Poppy Line puff along the coast between Sheringham and Holt, offering sweeping sea views. The trains host a number of events throughout the year, too, including Victorian Sundays and gin and ale tastings, as well as dining services. nnrailway.co.uk

WHITWELL AND REEPHAM RAILWAY STATION

Whitwell is Norfolk's most recently opened heritage railway, and it's especially appealing for families. You can see restored steam and diesel engines, visit the Station Museum, have a slice of cake in the cafe or keep younger ones entertained in the play area. Admission to the station is free; rides on the trains cost from £5. whitwellstation.com

WELLS & WALSINGHAM LIGHT RAILWAY

This quaint vintage train, runs along a four-mile branch of the Great Eastern Railway, which is the longest 10¼ narrow gauge steam railway in the world. Running between Wells and Walsingham, it chugs through the countryside, over bridges and past a hill-fort. wwlr.co.uk

From left: Moored rowing boats on Ormesby Little Broad, part of the Norfolk Broads; Holkham Hall, an 18th-century stately home

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DAY TWO SEALS & STARS

Morning

Blakeney Point is home to the largest colony of grey seals in England, with around 4,000 pups bobbing in the water or basking on the shingle banks year-round. Join Beans Boats for an hour-long seal trip departing from Blakeney Harbour at Morston. Heading out from Morston Creek, the boat passes Blakeney Freshes and salt marshes, where you'll notice plenty of samphire — a Norfolk delicacy. Once out in the harbour, have your camera ready as the seals often come up to take a closer look at the visitors. There are migrating sea birds to keep an eye out for, too, and insightful commentary about the history of the area, its wildlife and the seals is offered throughout. beansboattrips.co.uk

Afternoon

Cromer, on a cliff facing the often unforgiving winds of the North Sea, is a quintessential English seaside town. Oscar Wilde, Winston Churchill and King Edward VII all holidayed here, and the Pavilion Theatre on the pier hosts Europe's last surviving 'end of the pier' show. Stroll the seafront, looking out for the Bagot goats on the cliffs west of town. Brought in as grazing animals by the council in 2016 in a bid to manage the habitat naturally, the goats have become a much-loved sight here. Next, try your hand at catching Cromer crab from the pier; there's a gift shop at the entrance that sells crabbing essentials. You have to release any you catch, but there are plenty of crab shacks and restaurants in town that serve them.

Evening

North Norfolk is prime stargazing territory. Occasionally, when the conditions are right, it's even possible to spot the Aurora Borealis, rarely observed this far south. Two destinations — Kelling Heath Holiday Park and Wiveton Downs Site of Special Scientific Interest — are recognised among the UK's Dark Sky Discovery Sites. On clear nights here, you won't have any trouble spotting the seven stars of the Orion constellation and the Milky Way with the naked eye. Alternatively, join hundreds of amateur astronomers at one of the stargazing parties organised at Kelling Heath, or pick up their 'starchart guide' to navigate your own way through the dazzling night sky. kellingheath.co.uk

Right: The Morston Anchor specialises in fish and seafood

IMAGE: CHRIS TUBBS

TOP FIVE

Places to eat

THE GUNTON ARMS
Locally sourced venison, Aberdeen Angus sirloin steaks and thick pork chops are cooked on the open fire in the Elk Room here, under the fossilised antlers of a 10,000-year-old deer. Goose-fat roast potatoes and seasonal sides accompany the meats. theguntonarms.co.uk

THE MORSTON ANCHOR
A traditional village pub within striking distance of the quay in Morston, the recently refurbished Anchor is perfectly placed for line-caught fish and chips when you're back from a seal trip. themorstonanchor.co.uk

WELLS CRAB HOUSE
Award-winning Wells Crab House is located on the way from Wells beach into town. The best of what the sea has to offer, from oysters and crab to lobster and crayfish, finds its way on to the menu here. It's an intimate restaurant with just 11 tables — book in advance. wellscrabhouse.co.uk

CRAB POT CAFÉ
For a taste of Cromer's famous crab, this casual spot is hard to beat. Freshly caught crustaceans are brought straight from the boats in the morning and served dressed, on a platter or in sandwiches. facebook.com/crabpotcafe

MEADOWSWEET
Good for a special occasion, Holt's Michelin-starred Meadowsweet is a reflection of its surroundings. Natural materials and soft greens and greys dominate the interior while local produce is showcased in dishes such as chicken liver with smoked eel and red cabbage. meadowsweetholt.com

Bircham Windmill dates back to 1846

Sail away

Much of Norfolk's landscape is dotted with windmills, many of which were used for grinding flour. Bircham Windmill, near King's Lynn, is one of the only working mills open to the public — book ahead to climb the tower or bake bread. birchamwindmill.co.uk

THREE MORE OUTDOOR DESTINATIONS

Norfolk Coast Path

Walking the 84-mile path can take between five and seven days, but you can sample a bit of it in Sea Palling, where a six-mile circular walk takes in the golden sands of one of Norfolk's most beautiful beaches. En route, notice the small bays created by offshore reefs and look out for seals in the water.

Alternatively, head to Blakeney for a 7.5-mile circular walk around North Norfolk's salt marshes – the route skirts around Morston Salt Marshes and Cley Marshes Nature Reserve. You won't have much but those giant skies and birdsong for company. Twitchers might also enjoy a shorter stroll through Blakeney village and around Blakeney Freshes, in a bid to spot golden plovers and marsh harriers.

Deep History Coast

From the oldest human footprints found outside Africa to a mammoth skeleton, multiple prehistoric treasures have been unearthed along the Deep History Coast. While notable findings have been removed or washed away, it's still worth exploring; tackle a section of the 22-mile route from Weybourne to Cart Gap in a bid to find new treasures. Along the route, a 1.7-mile stroll east from Sheringham will take you to the Blue Flag beach at West Runton, an area rich with prehistoric relics, and the safest in which to go fossil-hunting, with gentle tides and lifeguards on duty. At low tide, a maze of rock pools is exposed, resembling the rocky surface of a far-away planet. visitnorthnorfolk.com

Norfolk Broads

The Broads, which have been a boating destination since the 19th century, are a man-made landscape. The wildlife-rich wetlands were created in the 14th century, when peat extraction pits began to fill with water until they were flooded and abandoned. Cutting through marshes, towns and farmland, the river network offers all manner of water-based activities. Broads Tours offers trips from Wroxham aboard double-decker boats. It's a great way to learn about the Broads' history and spot water birds. To navigate the rivers yourself, hire The Canoe Man SUP boards at one of its seven venues or jump into canoes or kayaks at Salhouse Broad. broadstours.co.uk thecanoeman.com salhousebroad.org.uk ■

MORE INFO

visitnorthnorfolk.com
visitnorfolk.co.uk

HOW TO DO IT

The best way to get around North Norfolk is by car. Otherwise take the train to Norwich and then catch a local service to Cromer or Sheringham. Regional bus services, like CoastLiner and CoastHopper, connect Norfolk destinations. greateranglia.co.uk

The Gunton Arms has doubles from £120 per night, B&B. theguntonarms.co.uk

IMAGE: ALAMY

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EAT

TEL AVIV

Drawing on its multicultural heritage, the Israeli coastal city has become a dynamic culinary destination, making the most of recipes and ingredients from all over the world

WORDS: ALICIA MILLER

When Khalil Karawan buys his chickpeas, he does it not in grams or kilos, but in tonnes. It takes such elephantine quantities to keep up with the fierce demand at Abu Hassan, the renowned hummus empire started by his grandfather in the 1950s. The business has grown so much from its humble food cart origins that 27-year-old Khalil can now sell thousands of plates each day across three locations in the ancient district of Jaffa. And when I visit his Shivtei Israel Street outpost one Friday morning, I arrive at peak hour.

"Our way is special; no one knows how to make hummus like us," Khalil says as crowded tables of people tuck into tahini-rich mouthfuls. "We start cooking the first batches at 4am, so they're ready for when we open at 7am." I run a chunk of pillowy bread through his creamy *masabacha* — hummus studded with whole chickpeas, flecked with parsley and paprika and glinting with lemon-hued oil. At Khalil's insistence, I dress it with pickled chilli sauce, the final kick in a riot of zingy richness.

It's perhaps no revelation that Tel Aviv nails hummus, one of the most famed Middle Eastern dishes. Yet Israel's seaside city holds more for hungry travellers than chickpea dip. Founded in 1909, this sweep of Bauhaus buildings and glossy skyscrapers has since engulfed its neighbour to the south — the biblical port of Jaffa, one of humanity's oldest settlements. Just as Tel Aviv fuses old and new so, it also acts as one big culinary laboratory, with immigration from every corner of the globe fuelling its vibrant food scene. You can find everything from world-class sushi to New York-style brasseries here. And there's no better time to get a taste of it than during the celebratory buzz of Friday, as practising Jews go out revelling before sunset, when Shabbat and its 25 hours of rest begin.

"Eat, eat! We'll make you stay to clean if you don't finish!", a server at Abu Hassan says, gently teasing me about my half-eaten dish of hummus. It's 11am, and the guide I'm due to meet, Karl Walter, born and raised in Tel Aviv, has promised me a lot to eat today. Despite my greed I don't want to fill up too early. When the server turns his back, I duck out into the street to meet Karl in the warm sunshine.

Clockwise from top: The view of Charles Clore Beach from the neighbouring park; one of the staircases leading to the sandstone streets of Old Jaffa; malabi has become a popular dessert in Israel

IMAGES: KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH; ISRAEL'S MINISTRY OF TOURISM

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Welcome to Old Jaffa

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A TASTE OF
Tel Aviv

GEORGE & JOHN
Eclectic dishes such as sea fish sashimi with rose perfume, or octopus roasted in lamb fat with corn tacos, roulade and green zhug (Yemeni-style hot sauce), are served at this elegant fine-dining restaurant. Acclaimed chef Tomer Tal blends techniques and flavours from the Mediterranean, East Asia and the Americas. Around 300 ILS (£63) for three courses, excluding wine. gandj.co.il

BEER BAZAAR
Serving a wide range of beers from local breweries, Beer Bazaar's Jaffa location is great on sunny days thanks to its street-side patio, though it's hard to beat the atmosphere of the Carmel Market original. Order a 55 ILS (£12) beer flight for the full experience, and be sure to line your stomach with nibbles like hummus and stuffed vine leaves. beerbazaar.co.il

CHEF'S TABLE AT R48
Tel Aviv is a city obsessed with brunch, and at upmarket boutique hotel R48 the spread becomes an art. Expect flaky pastries and cheese plates, plus lentil flatbreads topped with smoked mackerel, horseradish aioli and mountains of fresh herbs. There are breakfast cocktails, too. Book ahead and dress smartly. 220 ILS (£46) per person, excluding alcohol. r48.co.il

THE RESTAURANT AT HOTEL MONTEFIORE
With its moody lighting, tinkling music and soaring palms, the atmosphere of this classy stalwart feels transported from New York. Come for the socialising and people-watching as much as the French-Asian fusion menu featuring fish carpaccio with charred shallots and lime aioli, pork chop with bacon, and lamb with fermented yuzu butter. Around 265 ILS (£56) for three courses, excluding wine. hotelmontefiore.co.il

IMAGE: GAL CALDERON

Jerusalem artichoke, poached egg and pistachio at The Restaurant at Hotel Montefiore

Jaffa is humming with weekend promise. Around the central flea market, rows of honey-hued shops glint with silver antiques, wrinkled men pour over games of backgammon, and groups of friends clink frosty beers above overflowing restaurant tables. Here, the world is laid out on a plate: crowds queue for Iraqi *sabich,* a pitta sandwich brimming with fried aubergine, boiled egg and tahini; for Persian *malabi* (milk pudding) topped with rosewater jelly; and for Hungarian sweet pastries filled with poppy-seed paste. Karl leads me past a stall selling freshly pressed pomegranate juice towards Leon Bakery, where trays of *burek* (savoury stuffed pastries thought to originate from Turkey) are flowing from a tiny kitchen.

"We're all immigrants in Tel Aviv," he says, popping a few of the flaky filo parcels into a takeaway container along with some herby *dolmades* (rice-stuffed vine leaves). "But we adapt things from everywhere to make them our own. Each of these *burek,* for example, has been shaped according to its filling — some are triangular, others round or square. This way we don't accidentally mix meat and cheese, which is forbidden in Judaism."

The joyful energy of Jaffa is mirrored elsewhere across Tel Aviv. As we wander north east away from the old core, the honeyed stone buildings give way to jutting modernist low-rises with a coat of colourful street art. A 20-minute walk brings us to the bohemian neighbourhood of Florentin. The air is heavy with the fragrance of za'atar and cumin and the bars heave with punters sipping lunchtime cocktails before sitting down to Shabbat dinners with their families. After emerging onto leafy Rothschild Boulevard, the city's upmarket thoroughfare, Karl and I cut west along Park HaMesila, a once-abandoned strip of railway that now serves as a popular picnicking spot. From here, it's onto Neve Tzedek, where families wander down pavements lined with boutiques, munching ice creams as they go. A few streets beyond, the city unfolds to reveal golden beaches studded with sunbathers and volleyball players.

"This is the place to come for Shabbat dinner shopping," says Karl as we enter Carmel Market, the city's main produce hub. "Everyone here is buying last-minute things for tonight." All around us, elderly ladies pick through stalls heaving with oranges and fist-sized tomatoes, students point animatedly at dense blocks of halva, and couples fill bags with pickled herring and smoked salmon. As we stop at each stall, Karl's bags also begin to swell — this evening he'll visit his sister's house for his own weekly Shabbat ritual.

But Carmel Market isn't just for produce; it's also one of the city's best places for casual meals. Karl leads me down an alleyway past a Yemenite soup maker, where the aroma of slowly stewing beef and potatoes draws

Right: Carmel Market stocks spices from across the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean
Below: Halva, a popular sweet made from tahini

FIVE FOOD FINDS

1

HUMMUS

You won't really find a bad version of this local icon, but some of the best are found at Abu Hassan in Jaffa and Hummus HaCarmel in Carmel Market.

2

YEMENITE SOUP

Rich beef broths are a lunchtime speciality at Shimon the King of Soups in Carmel Market. Top-ups are free, so it's basically an all-you-can-eat.

3

CHICKEN SCHNITZEL

Tel Aviv has embraced the Germanic schnitzel as its own, though it's made with chicken rather than veal or pork. Try it at HaKovshim. hakovshim.com

4

HALVA

Made with nutty tahini and available in many flavours, this fudge-like sweet can be bought by the slice in Carmel Market.

5

MALABI

A milky pudding topped with a layer of rosewater jelly. Join the queue to try it at Malabi Dajani. 94 Jerusalem Ave, Jaffa

us towards the doorway. Peering inside the simple space — fitted with just a handful of wooden tables — I see bowlfuls of aromatic liquid and buttery bone marrow being mopped up with spongy *lahoh* (flatbread). "The soup recipe is simple," Karl tells me. "Start with as much garlic as you can get, then add more. Whatever you have already is not enough." It's tempting to pull up a chair and sample some, but when it comes to meat, we have a different spot in mind.

We find chef Jonathan Borowitz outside his butchery, Meat Market, opened in 2015. At the time he was a pioneer, sourcing premium Israeli meat and dry-ageing it for up to 35 days. He wanted only the best to serve in his nearby grill restaurant, M25 — so named because it's just 25 metres away — but soon realised there was demand from market customers, too. "We work with the farmers directly so we know everything about our meat," he says as I take in the array of marbled beef and lamb cuts behind the glass. "When you buy the whole animal, you respect that animal. All I do is take this beautiful produce and try not to ruin it."

Settling down at an outdoor table at M25, Karl and I sip beers while Jonathan sends out a flurry of dishes: savoury slivers of beef heart with chimichurri and lemon, tender cured tongue with horseradish, and *arayes* — pitta bread stuffed with juicy lamb mince and charcoal-grilled to an umami-rich crisp. Served with a side of tahini piled with chopped tomatoes and sliced peppers, it's Middle Eastern fast food at its finest. "Israel is a melting pot and I take inspiration from everywhere, from North Africa to my grandparents' heritage in Europe," says Jonathan. "This dish is borrowed from Palestinian cuisine. Butchers there have stalls where they grill meat like this for their lunch. Part of my job as a chef is to take forgotten dishes and meat cuts and reintroduce them." He's done more than that. His *arayes* triggered a Tel Aviv-wide obsession with the dish a few years ago. Many restaurants now sell the meat-filled pittas; it's become another adopted favourite in the local food lexicon.

The day is waning and the market is approaching closing time. Stallholders are clearing their produce and tables are thinning as restaurants wrap up service. Jonathan says his farewells, heading off to open his wine bar down the road. Karl peels off with his bags of goodies, bound for Shabbat at his sister's. But greedy to the last, I stay on, savouring those precious final bites of Friday in Tel Aviv.

HOW TO DO IT

Virgin Holidays has a six-night stay at The Jaffa, a Luxury Collection Hotel, from £1,506 per person, including flights from Heathrow. virginholidays.co.uk For more information on planning your visit, see goisrael.com

IMAGES: ALAMY

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SLEEP

RIO DE JANEIRO

Few cities are as naturally spectacular as Rio. Flanked by the Atlantic and Guanabara Bay, backed by jungle-furred peaks and strung together with miles of creamy sand, this is a place of singular beauty. The beachside neighbourhoods are the obvious areas to stay: legendary Copacabana, quieter Leme and trendier Ipanema, the gateway to Rio's western beaches. Don't write off inland, though — over the past decade, a new, boutique-style hotel scene has emerged. High above the historic centre, Santa Teresa is Rio's boho bastion. Directly below is nightlife-central Lapa. Whether on the coast or mid-city, Rio's hotel scene gives you the best of both worlds.

WORDS: JULIA BUCKLEY

ALL RATES QUOTED ARE FOR STANDARD DOUBLES, ROOM-ONLY, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. IMAGES: ALAMY; FRANCIS AMIAND

Best for boho style

£££ HOTEL SANTA TERESA

When Amy Winehouse picked a hotel for her Rio stay, she passed up the city's super-luxe beachfront properties for this coffee farm-turned-relaxed retreat in arty Santa Teresa. Sacks of coffee beans sit in the corridors, trees brush against the windows and in the simple bedrooms, cow hides cover the floorboards. In a garden bursting with tropical greenery, you'll find a pool and a bar terrace overlooking Rio's historic centre and Guanabara Bay. The hotel spills down the hillside, and one level below is pan-South American restaurant Térèze and the atmospheric Bar dos Descasados. Here, banquettes shelter behind a rustic stone colonnade and guests enjoy live comedy, jazz and Brazilian music. Note that there are no lifts.

ROOMS: From R$1,670 (£265), B&B.
santateresahotelrio.com

›

Best for views

£££ FAIRMONT RIO DE JANEIRO COPACABANA

Unquestionably the best digs on Copacabana, the Fairmont opened in 2019, turning the former Sofitel — two conjoined beehive-like tower blocks — into a world-class hotel. All 375 rooms have balconies, and even the entry level 'city view' categories snatch glimpses of the ocean. Rooms are classic discreet luxury, with polished wood floors, a mid-century feel to the furniture, and a few marine accents in the headboards or armchairs, echoing the view. Breakfast is served poolside, looking across the curve of Copacabana towards Sugarloaf Mountain. In addition to the two pools, there's a beach club just across the street, where the quietest and cleanest part of Copacabana meets Ipanema. Upgrading to a Fairmont Gold room (from around £50) nets you access to a VIP lounge with free evening food and drink. **ROOMS:** From R$1,680 (£270), B&B. fairmont.com

Best for beach

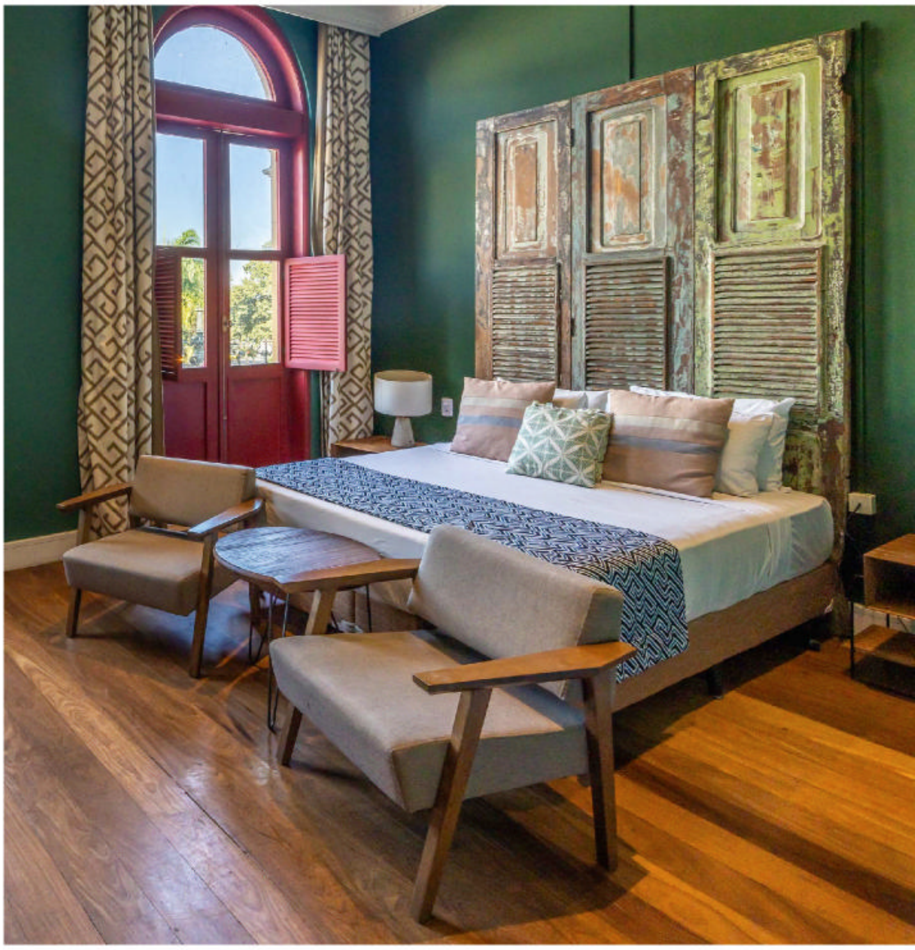
££ ARENA LEME

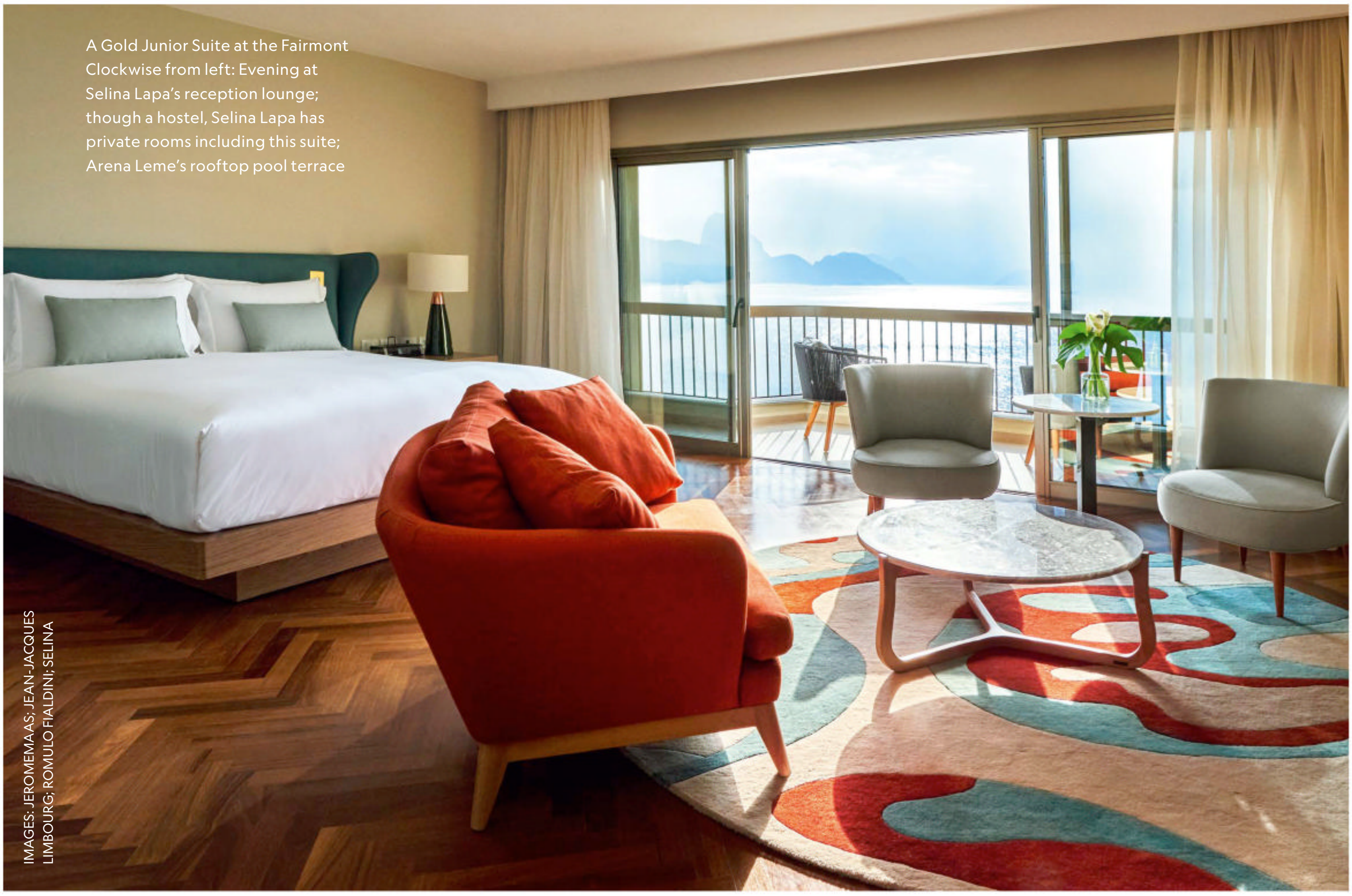
The streets and sands of lovely Leme are in far less demand than those of neighbouring Copacabana, meaning better value when it comes to hotels. This glass tower block, which opened in 2015, is a brilliant midrange choice. Most of its elegant rooms have panoramic images of the Rio landscape spread out behind each bed, as well as peerless views of the real thing. It's situated at the eastern end of the neighbourhood, which means it's further from the heart of the beach scene but you'll have fewer people to share the sand with. And if it ever gets crowded outside, there's a rooftop pool terrace to retreat to. **ROOMS:** From R$700 (£110). arenahotel.com.br

Best for party fiends

£ SELINA LAPA

Bang in the middle of party neighbourhood Lapa, just below Santa Teresa, the Selina has its own radio station — the sound of samba greets you when you enter the lobby — and even a cinema. This 'poshtel' (posh hostel) combines dorms and snug but smart en suite rooms, with clashing colours on the walls, murals galore and record players in the 'private plus' rooms. Suites and 'large suites' are gorgeous, with antique shutters doubling as headboards, high-arched windows and the odd exposed-brick wall. Come sunset, DJs take to the rooftop bar, with its views of Lapa and Rio's UFO-like cathedral. You'll find the Selina's colourful sister hotel on Copacabana. **ROOMS:** From $70 (£55), B&B. selina.com





A Gold Junior Suite at the Fairmont
Clockwise from left: Evening at Selina Lapa's reception lounge; though a hostel, Selina Lapa has private rooms including this suite; Arena Leme's rooftop pool terrace

IMAGES: JEROMEMAAS; JEAN-JACQUES LIMBOURG; ROMULO FIALDINI; SELINA

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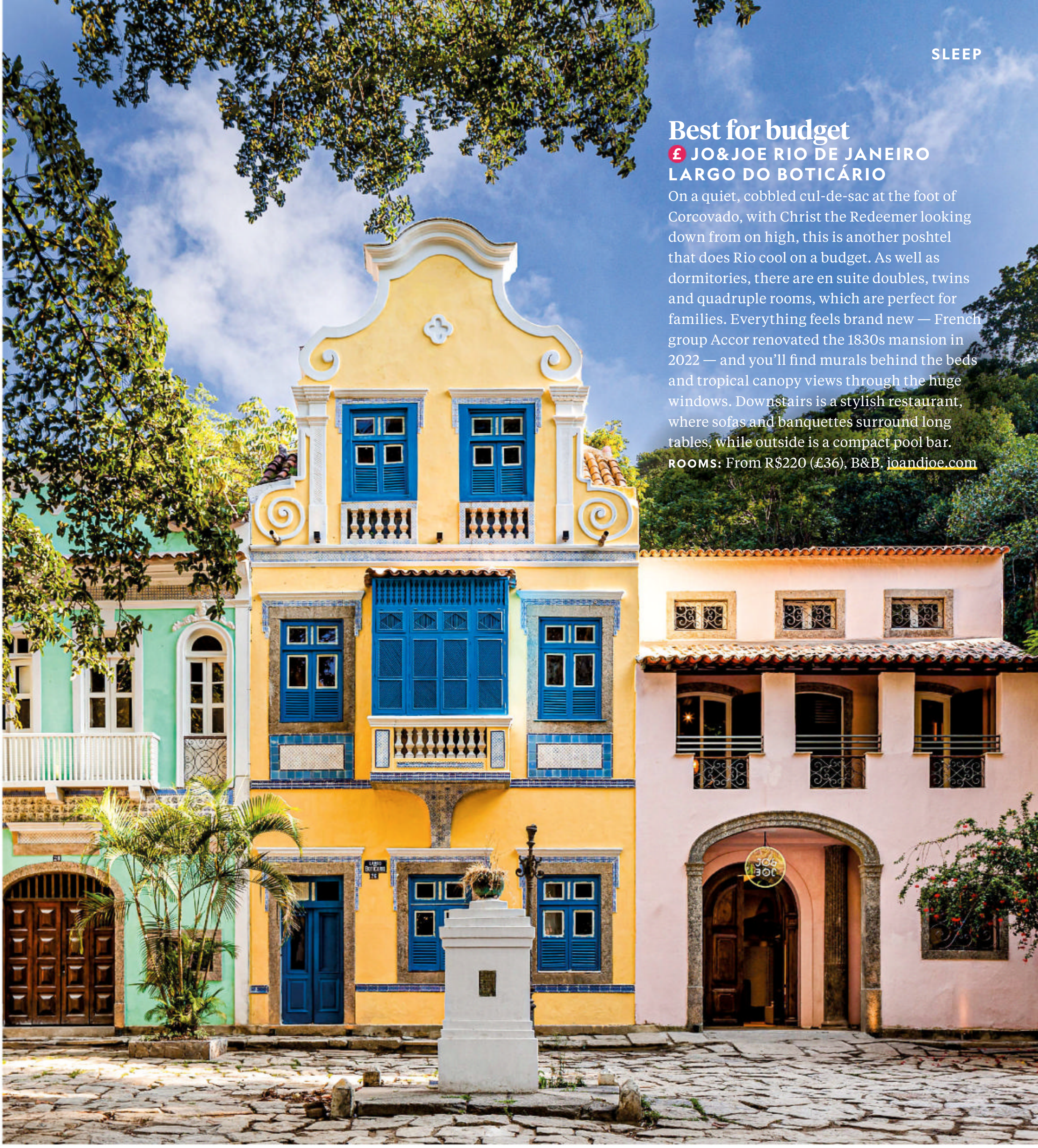


Best for budget

£ JO&JOE RIO DE JANEIRO LARGO DO BOTICÁRIO

On a quiet, cobbled cul-de-sac at the foot of Corcovado, with Christ the Redeemer looking down from on high, this is another poshtel that does Rio cool on a budget. As well as dormitories, there are en suite doubles, twins and quadruple rooms, which are perfect for families. Everything feels brand new — French group Accor renovated the 1830s mansion in 2022 — and you'll find murals behind the beds and tropical canopy views through the huge windows. Downstairs is a stylish restaurant, where sofas and banquettes surround long tables, while outside is a compact pool bar. **ROOMS:** From R$220 (£36), B&B. joandjoe.com

Best home-from-home

£ CASA AMARELO

Laurent Gelis fell in love with Rio on his first visit from France and, in 2006, he converted a Santa Teresa gingerbread house. Built in 1904, it's now an atmospheric hotel, its seven rooms squeezed into turrets and eaves. Behind its yellow facade, original elements get a contemporary makeover, from antique armchairs clad in paint-spattered textiles to colour-doused beams and patterned bedspreads. Outside, there's a pool and small garden. **ROOMS:** From €90 (£77), B&B. casa-amarelo.com

Best for history

££ VILA GALÉ

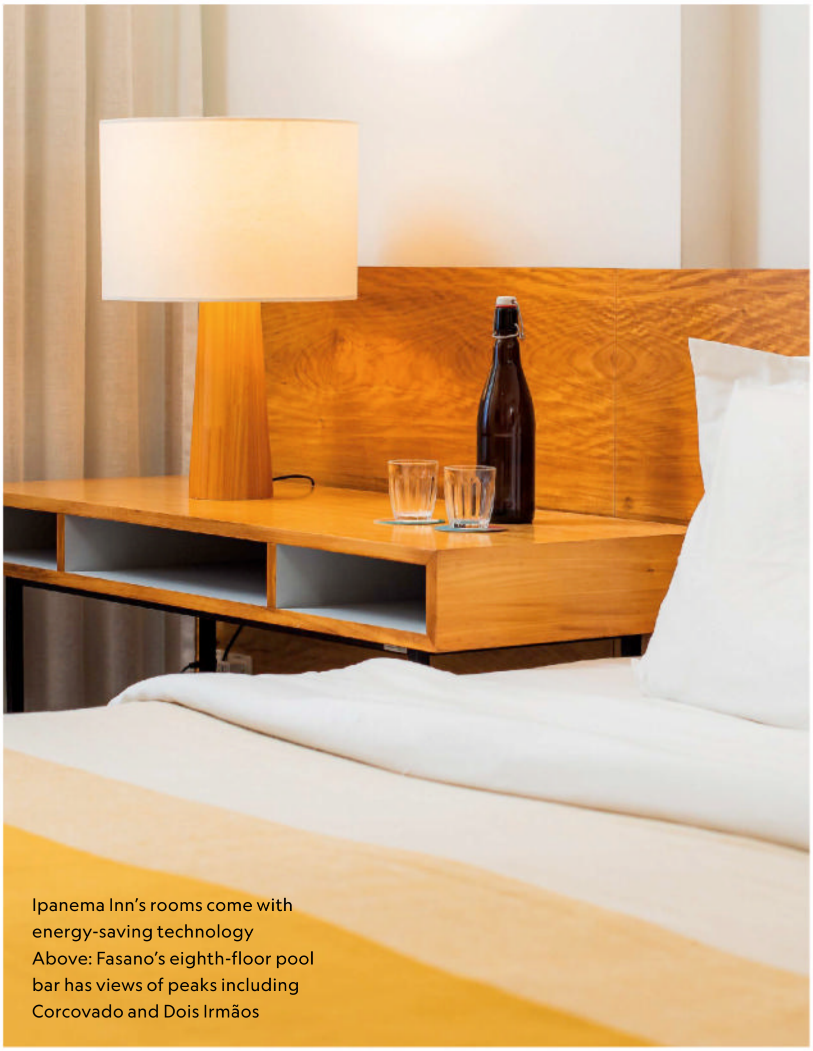
A sprawling 19th-century pink villa in heritage-rich Lapa channels Argentina's presidential palace from the front, and the mansions of New Orleans at the back, with its frilly wrought-iron balconies. Together with a 13-floor tower block, it forms the whopping 292-room Vila Galé. Poolside 'Preserved' rooms in the original villa have an old-school feel with high ceilings, lots of wood and classic window shutters, while standard rooms in the newer tower block, away from the road, pick up antique touches. **ROOMS:** From R$550 (£87), B&B. vilagale.com

Best for art lovers

£££ LA SUITE BY DUSSOL

Cantilevered over the coast, a beautiful mansion in the hills between Ipanema and Barra da Tijuca has been converted into eight super-luxe suites. Each is named and themed by colour, from the sexy Red suite with its whirlpool bath to the Black, whose walls of glass overlook the sea and the peaks of Dois Irmãos. While the original Warhol lithographs, contemporary sculptures and mid-century furniture from Brazilian designers are all bound to impress, the pool area is the real-jaw dropper. **ROOMS:** From R$931 (£150), B&B. bydussol.com

IMAGE: DHANI BORGES



Ipanema Inn's rooms come with energy-saving technology
Above: Fasano's eighth-floor pool bar has views of peaks including Corcovado and Dois Irmãos

Best for design buffs

£££ FASANO

Facing Ipanema's sands, the Fasano became an instant classic when it opened in 2007, with 1950s-style interiors designed by Philippe Starck and owner Gero Fasano. Walls are clad in *pau ferro*, a non-endangered wood from the Amazon; Gaetano Pesce's voluptuous Up armchairs sit in the corridors; and rooms have furniture and feature walls carved from Brazilian timber. All 89 rooms have balconies — choose one with an ocean view. Italian restaurant Gero has an outdoor patio, and the rooftop pool has views across Ipanema. **ROOMS:** From R$2,880 (£460). fasano.com.br

Best for sustainability

££ IPANEMA INN

Owner Daniel Gorin's grandparents opened this place in 1976, and in June 2023, the hotel became the first in Rio to be certified as zero-waste. Organic matter is composted and used in its bountiful planters, empty wine bottles become restaurant beakers, old linen is used to make toiletry bags — even the bins are made from recycled toothpaste tubes. And there's no single-use plastic in sight. A block back from Ipanema Beach, it has light-filled rooms upstairs and a lobby that blends into the Quitéria Café downstairs. **ROOMS:** From R$750 (£120), B&B. ipanemainn.com.br

IMAGES: HOTEL FASANO; EDUARDO MAGALHAES

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THAI

Its palm-fringed bays and warm waters may be world-class, but there's much more to do in Thailand than many expect — from slow island exploration and cave meditation in the south to hands-on farm experiences and craft workshops in the north

LAND

IMAGE: AWL IMAGES

White-sand Ao Kao beach, which benefits from Koh Mak's low-impact development policies
Previous pages: A long-tail boat in Phang Nga Bay, an area riddled with sea caves and limestone cliffs

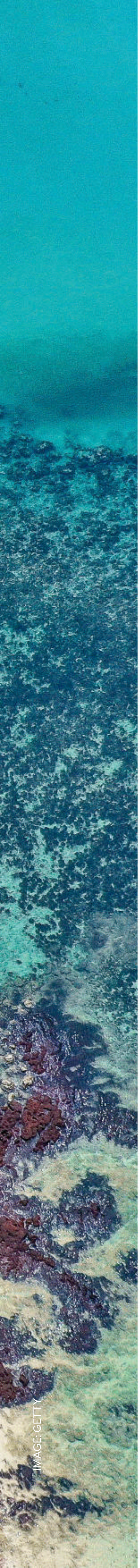


IMAGE: GETTY

EYEWITNESS

ONE FOR ALL & ALL FOR ONE

Community ownership has helped the residents of the eastern Thai island of Koh Mak curtail development and create a low-carbon haven for slow exploration. Words: Richard Franks

Menacing clouds skulk over Ao Pra Beach like a pack of starving wolves at dusk. We don't have much time. Racing against the impending storm, we chuck plastic bottles, food containers and beer-can rings into a washed-up rusty refrigerator, like we're on a dystopian episode of *Supermarket Sweep*.

"These things are a real nuisance to sea life," says Nipon Suddhidhanakool, his laid-back demeanour temporarily dissolving into frustration as he points at the old fishing nets and straws in our plastic molehill. "The fridge is, too, but at least it's not microplastic." I hadn't expected this island's crystal-clear waters to spew a kitchen appliance onto its powder-soft sands, but I'm told the rough seas at this time of year throw up all kinds of junk.

It's Koh Mak's low season and I'm on a beach-clean mission with Nipon. Along with five relatives and four other families, he co-owns this island in Trat province, 190 miles south east of Bangkok, near the Cambodian border. His work to preserve the island's natural beauty and water quality led to him becoming the chairman of the Koh Mak Tourism Community Enterprise. He also oversees the local branch of the worldwide, community-led Trash Hero initiative, which he brought to Koh Mak in 2017 to clean up the island and better manage waste.

"Koh Mak has a very different background to other Thai islands," says Nipon, stroking his grey chevron moustache as gigantic rain droplets plop from the 60ft-tall coconut trees around us. Whereas most of the country's islands are owned by government bodies or by various business groups, Koh Mak is the largest Thai island that's all in the hands of locals, and this unique community-ownership model puts residents in charge of setting the pace of change. "We have no higher powers involved, so the decisions we make collectively are final," he explains.

Many of Thailand's paths are famously well-trodden, but Koh Mak retains its authenticity through a comprehensive ecotourism approach designed, implemented and enforced by locals. The island stretches across 4.8sq miles and remains mostly undeveloped, free of large hotel brands, fast-food chains and nightclubs. It even lacks Thailand's omnipresent 7-Eleven convenience stores. Instead, locally owned hotel resorts, quirky art bars and family-run businesses thrive here. There are also just 500 hotel rooms on the island, which helps to control tourist numbers.

In 2022, Koh Mak was listed among the Top 100 Good Practice Stories by Green Destinations, a global organisation of leading travel professionals that works to promote sustainable destinations and their communities. Then, in 2023, the island took second place in the Governance, Reset and Recovery category at the Green Destinations Story Awards, securing its image as Thailand's trailblazing low-carbon destination. Projects such as promoting solar-powered boats, encouraging businesses to lease electric vehicles and discouraging the use of foam and plastic packaging helped Koh Mak secure the silver medal.

The Koh Mak Coral Conservation Group, led by Nipon's brother Noppadon Suddhidhanakool, also allows tourists — when weather permits — to join snorkelling trips that go out to plant seagrass as part of a rehabilitation programme, using old PVC tubing. Koh Mak is also only accessible by boat, which naturally prevents cars being brought over from the mainland. The only cars available here for tourists are *songthaews*: two-bench converted pick-up trucks with room for 10 people, which are used like a shared taxi.

For my own travels around the island, I'm using a trusty push bike borrowed from my hotel, the Mira Montra, which opens onto the shimmering sands of Ao Pra beach. Koh Mak is largely flat, so getting around is a joy: the breeze on two wheels offers temporary respite from the heavy humidity and the slower pace allows me to better absorb my surroundings.

As I cycle, I find salty sea air, humid petrichor and the scent of latex interchangeably wafting around me on each bend of the road. Agriculture is Koh Mak's major industry and I smell the rubber plantations before I see them. Small black pots are tied by lace to

No fishing
Allow Only Squid fishing

most of the trees, holding deposits of milky white sap smelling of charred vanilla. It's strangely intoxicating. As this is an island with limited access to the mainland, all natural resources are considered precious on Koh Mak, and its community is passionate about reusing materials in order to reduce waste. When I join a tie-dye workshop at Roja Studio of Art, exuberant owner Rodjamarn Siriut, barefoot and sporting a deep-indigo tie-dye T-shirt of her own design, explains how she uses discarded leaves and shells of natively grown mangosteens and coconuts to make natural dyes. "As part of our commitment to be as sustainable as possible, we only use materials for our natural dyes that are available to us at the time," she says.

Keen to see more of the island's creative community, I spend the evening drinking Chang beer and playing board games with residents at Koh Mak Art House, a makeshift bar, gallery and musicians' hangout a 10-minute cycle from my hotel. At the recycled wooden bar, I take a seat between a nomadic Australian businessman, who moved to Koh Mak several months ago, and the owner of local Japanese restaurant 12Bar. Koh Mak Art House owner Ales, originally from the Czech Republic, takes great pleasure in pointing out paintings and sculptures by local artists dotted around the place, alongside the guitars propped up against the wall for impromptu jamming sessions.

On a cycle back to the hotel after dark, I see other sides to Koh Mak. To avoid what would be a mighty uphill cycle, I follow an off-road shortcut through a dimly lit trailer park, swerving dirt-track potholes, narrowly avoiding chunky tree roots jutting out of the soil and dodging dozens of bats that make a beeline for my face at breakneck speed. Back on the main road, I enjoy a calmer experience among synchronous fireflies, chirping crickets and the light patter of rain.

The next morning, paddling out on the bay in a kayak gives me the chance to blow away the cobwebs. I especially enjoy these slow mornings on Koh Mak, where breakfast consists of fresh watermelon, pineapple and coconut water and slack waves wash onto the deserted beach like paint spilling from a tin. I begin to wonder whether keeping tourist numbers so low can be sustainable for businesses here, but then I remember something Nipon had said on the beach clean-up: "It has never been about money," he'd explained, throwing a half-full jerry can into the washed-up fridge. "We just want to ensure our home is sustainable for future generations." With this model, there's every chance it will be.

How to do it: Southeast Asia specialist All Points East runs small-group tours to Koh Mak. A four-day tour of the island, excluding international flights but including return domestic flights from Bangkok and accommodation, costs from 18,800 TH (£416) per person. allpointseast.com tourismthailand.org

Left, from top: A worker taps a rubber tree on Koh Mak; a hand-painted wooden sign at Ao Pra Pier alerts visitors to the island's attempt to conserve fish species while continuing to embrace the tradition of squid fishing
Right: Phang Nga Bay, known for its sheer limestone karsts

IMAGES: DENISE MILITZER; ALAMY

ISLANDS

Six alternative active island escapes

Whether you want to scale beach boulders, snorkel above the reef or kayak in bioluminescent waters, there's a Thai island for every outdoor adventure

1 CLIMB ON KOH TAO

While the beaches of Railay and Tonsai, in Krabi, scoop up most keen climbers, the island of Koh Tao, off Thailand's eastern coast, is growing in popularity thanks to a quieter location and its 200-million-year-old granite rocks. Novice climbers can scale boulders on beaches, in the jungle and at various elevation levels around the island.

Top tip: Book tours through Goodtime Adventures. goodtimethailand.com

2 DIVE OFF THE SURIN ISLANDS

This archipelago sits within the jewel-like waters of Mu Ko Surin National Park. It's wonderfully quiet as the remote dive sites, like Hin Rap and Koh Chi, are only accessible via a handful of liveaboard boat hotel operators (running October to May), including sail-based The Junk. Eagle-eyed divers may spot blueface angelfish and tomato clownfish. thejunk.com

Top tip: Visit between February and April for the chance to spot manta rays and whale sharks.

3 HIKE ON KOH ADANG

Serene Koh Adang, just a 10-minute boat ride from popular Koh Lipe, sits in the Tarutao National Marine Park and is blanketed in rainforest, making it an ideal destination for hikers and nature-lovers. Climb 690m to the island's highest point for an undisturbed sunrise over the Andaman Sea.

Top tip: A 200 TH (£4.50) entrance fee applies to visitors, but is valid for five days and covers all 51 islands in the Tarutao National Marine Park.

4 SNORKEL OFF KOH HAE

At Koh Hae's Banana Beach, monitor lizards roam the white sands and tropical fish whizz around an abundant coral reef. Part of the beach's charm lies in the fact that accessing it takes some effort: after a 25-minute crossing from Rawai or Chalong, on Phuket, a 20-minute off-road hike or additional boat ride is required.

Top tip: Pool together with other travellers to make the long-tail boat crossing (around 1,500 TH/£34 return) more affordable.

5 SAIL AROUND THE RACHA ISLANDS

Wind whips through the channel between Koh Racha Yai and Koh Racha Noi, making sailing here a joy. Koh Racha Yai's white-sand beaches are backed by rak talay trees (home to green tree frogs), while Koh Racha Noi's west coast is a top spot for fishing. Companies in Phuket such as Sailing Phuket can get you there with crewed boat charters. sailing-phuket.com

Top tip: Dock at Ao Tawan Tok, on Koh Racha Yai, a pristine, U-shaped bay.

6 KAYAK IN PHANG NGA BAY

Having launched his first kayaking company in 1983, Californian John Gray is quite the expert on sea tours. He knows the tidal sea caves and cliff-backed lagoons around Phang Nga Bay like the back of his hand and runs a number of tours, including a glide through bioluminescent plankton at night. johngray-seacanoe.com

Top tip: The bioluminescent plankton is best viewed during a new moon between November and April. **RF**

ISLANDS

SOUL SISTERS

Shedding their backpacker image, the neighbouring islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phangan are home to some of Thailand's most immersive wellness retreats

BEST FOR SPIRITUAL BALANCE

Generations of bare-footed Buddhist monks once trekked to Arjan Cave in search of enlightenment, and the stone path leading to this meditation space is still lined with fluttering prayer flags. The cave has since become the spiritual heart of Kamalaya, a five-star wellness hotel on Koh Samui, just off southern Thailand's east coast. Guests have to stoop to enter the womb-like space, carved into two gigantic granite boulders. Inside, a golden glow emanates from dozens of candles, casting shadows across a stone altar crowded with offerings: bowls filled with coins and trinkets; vases of jasmine and marigolds; stacks of smouldering incense sticks; and dozens of little wooden models of galleons, a nod to Koh Samui's seafaring history. It's a scene that immediately slows the pulse and calms the nervous system.

Shrouded in a dense forest of palms, coconut trees, tropical flowers and limpid lotus ponds, Kamalaya encourages travellers to reconnect with themselves and the natural world, whether that means morning yoga classes overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, moonlit tasting dinners on the pearlescent, sandy beach or taking part in one of the hotel's award-winning wellness programmes. The latter cover everything from stress and burnout to helping travellers optimise fitness levels or build confidence, with the edenic surroundings providing an added dopamine boost.

How to do it: Doubles from 14,800 TH (£327), room only, minimum three-night stay. Three-night Relax and Renew wellness programmes start from 49,403 TH (£1,094) per person. kamalaya.com

BEST FOR DETOXING

Sitting in a secluded bay on Koh Phangan, The Sanctuary Thailand is best reached by long-tail boat, gliding across crystalline waters full of tropical fish. Guests who book a fasting programme get colonics, herbal steams, one-to-one healing sessions and Thai massages at the breeze-cooled wellness centre. For added relaxation, grab a hammock and unwind to the sound of waves crashing on the beach. thesanctuarythailand.com

BEST FOR YOGA

Absolute Sanctuary, on Koh Samui, is best known for its exceptional yoga sessions, usually held on a flower-filled hill overlooking the sea. But this fondant-pink, Grecian-styled retreat with 38 rooms also has year-round access to therapists offering one-to-one astrology, art therapy and sound massage sessions. Rooms are set around a large swimming pool, and it's just a 15-minute drive from Koh Samui airport. absolutesanctuary.com

BEST FOR PEACE & QUIET

There aren't many Buddhist retreats that have the kind of sea views you'll find at Dipabhavan Meditation Center, a mountain monastery in the lush east of Koh Samui. Guests stick to a rigorous routine, including 4.30am wake-ups, chanting meditation and yoga. Participants enrol for free (though donations are expected) and must help with chores and meal prep. Everyone gets a private room, with a wooden bed, mat and mosquito net. dipabhavan.weebly.com

BEST FOR FITNESS

There's a real sense of community at Koh Fit Thailand, an all-inclusive fitness resort on Koh Samui's southeastern coast. Retreats include personal training sessions, and guests can also dip into daily core workout classes, jungle hikes and training classes on tranquil Lamai Beach. Simply styled rooms feature French doors that open onto balconies with jungle views or decks leading to the swimming pool. kohfitthailand.com **LEE COBAJ**

IMAGES: RALF TOOTEN; TIME KAAN

ตามกาล
Time Kaan

Granita made from ma mao (also known as Thai blueberry) at TIme Kaan
Above, from left: Arjan Cave at Kamalaya was once used by monks; Chef Po (left) and co-owner Pui, of Time Kaan

EYEWITNESS

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A project designed to revive ancient Thai recipes and reinvent them for modern diners is causing a stir in Bangkok. Words: Justin Meneguzzi

A Thai princess and her entourage sweep through the glass-atrium foyer of Time Kaan, past tall cabinets stuffed to the ceiling with antique tomes and recipe books, to take a seat for dinner. Dutiful waiters are lined up against the wall waiting to be called forward, and the mingled fragrance of cinnamon, pepper and coconut drifts from the kitchen. A flash-happy photographer buzzes around the dining room, capturing the royal arrival, while, behind him, a large clock with golden hands counts down the minutes to the first course.

After opening in December 2022 in Bangkok's Khlong Tan Nuea district, Time Kaan — its name meaning 'according to time' in Thai — quickly became the talk of the town. Restaurant critics have admired the subtle flavours and balanced dishes, while social media pundits have fallen in love with head chef Pornprom (Pol) Laomanutsuk's theatrical presentation. It's little wonder the princess has been drawn here tonight.

The signature seasonal 14-course set meal features versions of dishes that graced humble tables long before King Vajiralongkorn's ancestors founded Bangkok in 1782, and even before the founding of the Kingdom of Sukhothai, in what's now north-central Thailand, in 1238. Dining here promises to transport the princess back in time through the eras, conquests and dynasties that shaped Thailand, by exploring how and what Thai people ate.

When co-owner Tripradap (Pui) Wangwongwiwat greets me at my table, she is cool and composed and seems utterly unfazed by the royal spectacle that has just rolled in. It's a demeanour she perfected over many years spent working under pressure in Michelin-starred restaurants used to receiving celebrity and millionaire diners.

For two years, during the Covid-19-induced border closures, Pui fastidiously collected as many books about Thai cuisine as she could find, forensically tracing the origins of dishes and ingredients through the pages of diplomatic diaries, poems, archived newspapers and dog-eared cookbooks. Most were found in libraries and antique bookshops, but others involved missions across the country to find forgotten texts gathering dust on family bookshelves.

The resulting library is contained in locked glass cabinets, which Pui shows me on an impromptu tour around the restaurant. There are well over a thousand books here, but I'm taken aback when Pui slides open the door of an unused function room to reveal hundreds more books haphazardly scattered across a large table, still waiting to be properly catalogued.

Joining us on the tour is chef Pol. After settling on which dishes would be resurrected to create Time Kaan's menu,

Pui called in Pol to shape her findings into the restaurant's signature menu. The two had become friends while working together in the restaurant industry, and Pui knew she could trust Pol to faithfully reinvent the dishes. Even with years under her belt working among Bangkok's culinary elite, Pol admits she was baffled when she first heard the brief.

"One of the dishes dates back more than 1,200 years," says Pol, to a time when people lived off a subsistence diet of rice, meat and foraging. "A lot of what people ate in the past isn't suitable for diners today. I had to reinterpret the recipes for modern taste buds."

Taste was one dilemma; another issue was health and safety. As we return to our table to eat, Pol serves one of the first courses: a spicy salad made with red sea bass. She explains that, historically, this dish was made using an uncommon river fish now known to carry a risk of parasites. That fish has been swapped for sea bass, which Pol chooses herself at the market.

Other changes were more sartorial. A vibrant and aromatic *chu chi* curry from Ayutthaya, the product of Indian, French and Portuguese trading influences mingling in the ancient port city, is dressed up for social media-loving diners with an artistic wafer made from rice flour, lime leaves, coconut and turmeric. The wafer is a fragrant introduction to the curry's sweeter flavours before diners dive into the rich, fiery sauce.

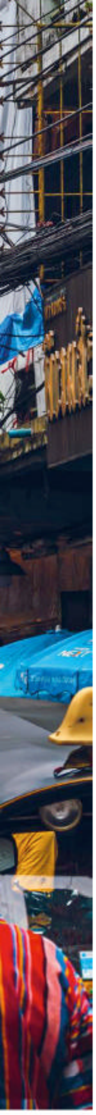
Decorations aside, every plate has a story to tell. When each course arrives, Pui transforms into a keen amateur historian, rapidly reciting facts and dates. A grilled chicken and rice dish delivers a deep, earthy spiciness, which Pui explains comes from green peppercorns that were originally used to add heat in Thai food before Portuguese traders arrived in 1511, likely bringing chillies from South America.

Later in the meal, a black sesame and rice dessert called the 'gold scratching rock', which resembles a rough brick of charcoal topped with a leaf of edible gold, lands on our table inside a glass pot. Pui's research found it first appeared three centuries ago and was made for soldiers as a source of energy to carry into battle during the Burmese–Siamese wars. The women who originally baked this dish were, apparently, themselves inspired by Ayutthaya's gold-mining past, when miners would scratch gold with rocks to test if it was genuine.

But for all that's known about these recipes, there are also many details and ingredients that have been lost to history. Pui says Time Kaan isn't striving for complete culinary authority. "I don't like when people say one type of food is more authentically Thai than something else", she tells me in between courses. "We've been through over 10,000 years of evolution and we should let our food evolve, too. A century from now, how do we know that people will still be eating what we eat today?"

That intersection between tradition and progress is exactly where Time Kaan finds itself as it entices Thai youth to rediscover their heritage in a new, playful way. Halfway through our meal, I'm presented with a palate-cleanser that perfectly captures this concept: a refreshing granita made from *ma mao* (also known as Thai blueberry), an ancient fruit that's increasingly being grown by progressive Thai vintners to make wine. The granita arrives adorned with delicate pearls of mint gel, promising a taste of the past and future in one zesty, mouth-popping bite. timekaan.com

Clockwise from above: Yaowarat Road, the main artery of Bangkok's Chinatown; chu chi curry, one of the dishes at Time Kaan inspired by ancient recipes; vendors at Khlong Toei market, Bangkok



IMAGES: GETTY; TIME KAAN; ALAMY

FOUR MORE

Bangkok food experiences

1 TAKE BREAKFAST WITH A SIDE OF HISTORY

Nicknamed 'the morning pork walk' by Bangkok tour operator Expique, this roving breakfast tour fuels explorations through the Bang Rak and Yannawa neighbourhoods. While sampling pork skewers, dim sum and *jok* (rice porridge), you'll learn how many of Thailand's favourite breakfast dishes arrived from China before being modified with local ingredients. expique.com

2 CRUISE THROUGH THONBURI'S PAST

Thonburi's crisscrossing canal network, featuring stilt houses and temples jutting out of the water, offers a peek into Bangkok's watery past. Board a private long-tail boat and savour specialities such as prawn red curry and peppery noodle soup. bangkokfoodtours.com

3 TAKE A GRASSROOTS COOKING CLASS

Having struggled to make a living selling rice, amateur chef Khun Saiyuud Diwong (who goes by the name Poo — short for 'Chompoo', or rose apple) turned her fortunes around by starting a community cooking school in Khlong Toei. Learn about your ingredients on a shopping trip to a wet market, then practise making your own curries, pad thai and mango sticky rice. cookingwithpoo.com

4 EXPLORE BANGKOK'S MIDNIGHT MARKETS

As Bangkok's residents wind down for bed, market vendors continue to work through the night to prepare for the early morning rush. See a different side of the city after dark as you zoom through empty streets by tuk-tuk and eat your way through three of the city's midnight markets on this tour. expique.com

EYEWITNESS

FABRIC OF LIFE

Deep in the forested hills of northern Thailand, the former teak-logging town of Phrae has become an unlikely fashion hub, reviving artisan indigo craftmanship for a new generation. Words: Lucie Grace

"When I was small, it was all very traditional," muses 69-year-old Prapapan Sritrai as she shows me around her workspace, where huge vats of bubbling, inky-blue liquid are being stirred by her husband. Auntie Ngeam, as she's known locally, is one of a third generation of indigo artisans in a family descended from the Phuan, a people known for their handwoven fabrics. A sizeable Phuan community, originally from Laos, settled in Phrae, in northern Thailand, after being displaced from their homeland when the borders of Siam were expanded in the late 19th century, bringing their indigo craftsmanship with them.

Auntie Ngeam's Tardis-like indigo studio is located down a slim alley in Ban Thung Hong, a village on the outskirts of Phrae, almost equidistant between Chiang Mai and the Laos border. Here, where the green rolling hills are dissected by the Yom River and its tributaries, the acanthus and indigofera tinctoria plants central to indigo production flourish. Indigo — and, specifically, the production of dark-blue *mo hom* shirts, a common uniform for rural and agricultural workers in Thailand — became a key industry in Phrae after the demise of the local teak industry following the Second World War.

Auntie Ngeam inherited a small *mo hom* operation from her parents more than 30 years ago and has played a key role in updating Thailand's indigo clothing over the past decade. "Every shop on the street had plain *mo hom* denim shirts, so I started thinking about how we could stand out," she says. "I tried using the indigo to tie-dye modern clothes." Now a common sight in Thai markets across the country, the tie-dyed garments that Auntie Ngeam pioneered have become a phenomenon.

Indigo has also brought tourism directly to Phrae. The town's gingerbread-style teak houses act as a reminder of the wealth that flowed through here in the 1880s, when Phrae was the global epicentre of the teak industry. As well as taking apprentices in droves, Auntie Ngeam collaborates with the local government to promote local indigo via tie-dye workshops for tourists. And, for the past six years, the town has also hosted the Phrae Craft festival, a weekend event of markets and catwalk displays showcasing small, independent indigo artisans. The festival is run by Nanthanit Boyd, a former apprentice of Auntie Ngeam's, who I meet at

From left: Wat Phra That Suthon Mongkhon Khiri temple complex, Phrae; Auntie Ngeam sewing tie-dye fabric; Passakorn sorting garments in his store

IMAGES: ALAMY; PORAMET POTIRUNGSIYAKORN

the latter's workshop. As well as running Phrae Craft, Boyd has her own haute-couture indigo fashion line, Natcharal, which she launched in 2016. Today, it's pushing the boundaries of indigo textile fashion, bringing Phrae designs to Bangkok catwalks. "Phrae is a very peaceful town, but we have artisanal events and creative showcases all year round," says Boyd.

She takes me to the workshop of Passakorn Sangdoung Khamsam, who runs his Nat Craft indigo clothing brand from Phrae. He's a tall chap with indigo-stained hands and is slightly flustered, having just returned from playing a volleyball match for the Thai national team in Cambodia. Passakorn tells me he previously worked as a civil servant for Phrae's council but moved into the indigo industry in 2020 on the suggestion of Auntie Ngaem — and with the encouragement of his parents, who are weavers and master crocheters in their own right. When he's not playing volleyball, Passakorn designs catwalk lines, too, using textures influenced by his family's textile background. "Everything is made with love," he says with a smile, adding that his family often work alongside him to craft his wares.

Intergenerational indigo businesses are ubiquitous in Phrae. My next stop is Banmatjai Indigo Workshop, which was opened by the women of the Suchanok family 10 years ago, when eldest daughter Chidchanok Suchanok returned home after graduating in design from Chiang Mai University. "I wondered why my generation wasn't adapting and appreciating indigo," she says. "It's our Phuan heritage and a local resource."

Today, alongside her younger sister Chadanoot and their seamstress mother Amonpun, she runs one of the most successful workshop spaces in Phrae. It's a peaceful, leafy place with an indigo tie-dyeing area, a pottery studio where Chadanoot runs ceramics sessions, a coffee shop and a small boutique where the trio sell their beautifully cut clothes. They see it as their mission to assist others on their own artisan path. "We like to help people who are coming back to their hometown of Phrae and wanting to work in indigo," says Chidchanok. "It's bringing more jobs to locals."

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, an increasing number of townspeople have returned to Phrae, disillusioned with Bangkok life and looking for more fulfilling, creative work closer to home. And as a new generation accepts the indigo mantle, Phrae has been reborn as a craft hub, creating employment through small-scale manufacturing and by encouraging both domestic and international travellers to this quiet corner of Thailand.

"The creativity is already here, all you have to do is make it shine brighter so people can see it," says Boyd, joining me for lunch before I leave town. "Some people think we need a big flashy tourist attraction in Phrae, but I think differently. We don't need that. We're already cool."

How to do it: Absolutely Fantastic Holidays can organise tailor-made seven-day itineraries to Phrae and Na from 91,000 TH (£2,013) per person, including six nights' accommodation, B&B, with a private guide and transport, workshops and admission fees, but excluding flights. Phrae Craft festival takes place on 2-4 December 2023. absolutelyfantasticholidays.com facebook.com/phraecraft

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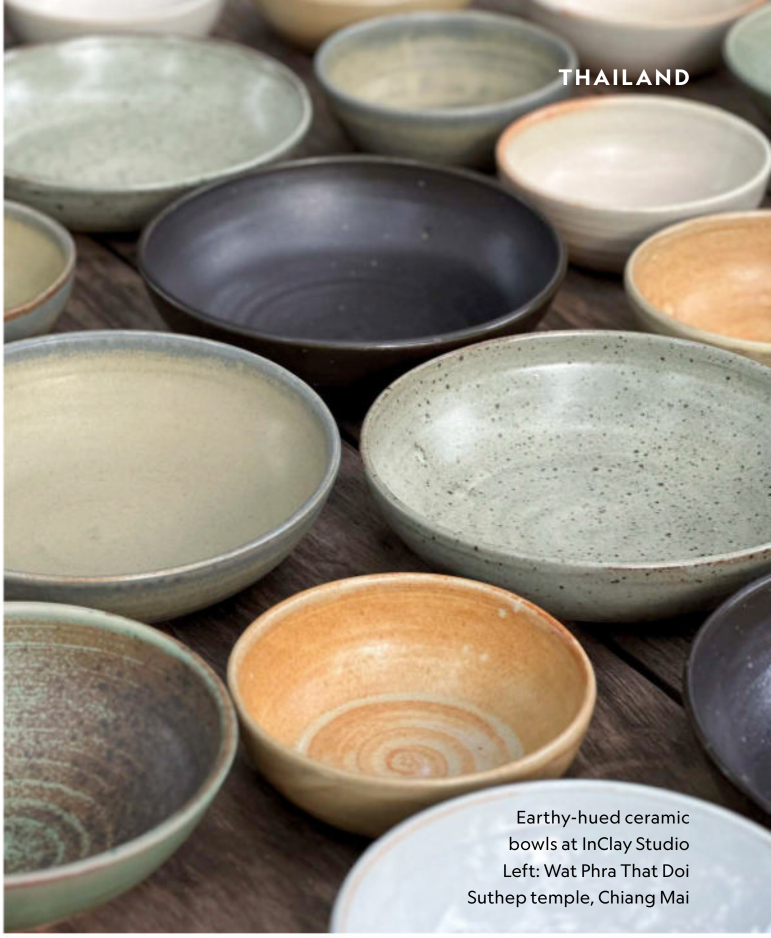

Earthy-hued ceramic bowls at InClay Studio
Left: Wat Phra That Doi Suthep temple, Chiang Mai

IMAGES: GETTY; KANYAWEE BOONPANYA/INCLAY STUDIO

NORTHERN THAILAND

THE MAKERS OF CHIANG MAI

Northern Thailand's largest city has harnessed its artisan heritage to become a centre for contemporary makers and designers, many of whom now offer hands-on craft experiences for travellers

UMBRELLA MAKING CENTRE

Among northern Thailand's most iconic accessories, colourful paper parasols were once used by the well-to-do in the ancient Lanna Kingdom. Today, they're a common local decoration and a favourite night market souvenir for travellers. Craftspeople have been making these delicate umbrellas for more than 200 years and, at this centre in Bo Sang village, a 30-minute drive from Chiang Mai, travellers can watch artisans at work or paint and decorate their own parasols to take home. From 200 TH (£4.50). handmade-umbrella.com

INCLAY STUDIO

As well as hosting studio sessions for fans, local ceramicist Jirawong Wongtrangan produces made-to-order art and homewares for Chiang Mai hotels, restaurants and collectors. Jirawong's work is inspired by the area's mountainous landscape and draws on the earthy palette found in local clay deposits: white porcelain hues from Lampang, to the east; yellow tones from Hang Dong, to the south; and pale browns from Mae Rim, in the north. Workshops at his large studio, just west of the walls of the old city, cater to everyone from complete beginners upwards. The studio team can arrange to ship your creations home to you. From 990 TH (£22) for a one-day class. inclaystudio.com

NOVA CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY

Wat Sri Suphan, a 16th-century temple almost entirely coated in silver, beautifully showcases Chiang Mai's silversmithing heritage. Keeping tradition alive in a peaceful space east of the city's ancient Thapae Gate, Nugoon Jaturanon teaches silverwork classes for beginners. The lessons on soldering and texture are inspired by the city's past but focus on sleek, contemporary design. Suitable for those aged 12 and over.From 2,000 TH (£45)f or a one-day class. nova-collection.com

RADA LOOM

Master craftsman Khun Ong and his wife Rada run this revered textiles school and shop in Hang Dong district. As experts in different weaving patterns from the villages and regions of the wider Chiang Mai area, they can customise workshops and private lessons depending on participants' tastes. Weaving classes are held in the bright, earthy studio space lined with looms of all sizes and varieties. Khun also makes looms to sell and runs a small store of handwoven bags, rugs and fabric homewares for those who prefer to shop rather than make. Pricing is bespoke, depending on the design and materials. facebook.com/radaloom

A DANG HOME STUDIO

This charming garden studio a few minutes north of the city is run by two young fine-art graduates, Poom Chanavee Doungmanee and Pupah Puritchapat Platongkam. They've taken northern Thailand's legacy of ornate teak woodwork and flipped it on its head, making it their mission to share the idea that woodcraft can be contemporary and versatile. Moving away from the typical elephant motifs popular in northern Thailand, the duo instead encourage travellers to design their own expressive sculptures and to use woodwork as a way to develop a connection with the forested mountains that surround the city. From 2,300 TH (£51) for a two-day wood-carving course. facebook.com/a.danghomestudio **LUCIE GRACE**

EYEWITNESS

WAKE UP & SMELL THE COFFEE

A hands-on farming day with the Lahu hill tribe offers travellers a unique insight into how remote communities are working towards a more sustainable future. Words: Justin Meneguzzi

Like a finely brewed macchiato, roasting your own coffee beans is a layered affair. Standing at the bench of a makeshift mud-brick hut deep in northern Thailand's fertile forests, coffee farmer Lo-Ue Jayo is about to guide me through my first coffee-making lesson using a 72-year-old Probatino roaster.

"You don't need books to learn how to make good coffee," says Lo-Ue encouragingly, his hazel eyes watching me intently as I crank the roaster by hand. "We learn how to roast by using all the senses: looking, listening, smelling. It's like cooking." Slowly and evenly, I turn the roaster's handle to rotate the beans. I'm quickly greeted by a faint nutty aroma, which grows more robust as the beans churn inside the drum. Wispy white smoke begins to curl from the roaster's small opening, followed by a popping sound that signals the beans are starting to caramelise.

When the popping stops, Lo-Ue's broad, toothy smile appears and he nods with approval. Roasting is an artform, he tells me — one that requires practice to perfect the bean's flavour profiles.

Lo-Ue should know. When he first established his Arabica coffee farm 14 years ago, he had no experience in growing or making coffee and wasn't even a regular coffee drinker. He practised by roasting 100kg of the stout beans from scratch before eventually finding a recipe he liked. As he tells me about the history of his farm, Lo-Ue deftly transfers my beans to a bamboo pan, then tosses them in the air to cool, releasing plumes of smoke that hang over this patch of Suan Lahu land like a caffeinated cloud.

Tucked between the mountainous folds of Chiang Rai's border in northern Thailand, with no public transport nearby, the organic coffee farm is tricky to reach. On our 90-minute drive here, the clamour of Chiang Mai's markets was quickly replaced by rice paddies and roadside fruit stalls, the unfurling highland scenery occasionally punctured by the golden spires of Buddhist temples.

Now, over the grinding of beans, Lo-Ue tells me how these fertile hills are home to seven tribes and their complex, branching family subgroups. Some, like the Lawa, pre-date the formation of Thailand and are considered Indigenous, while others, like the Lahu and Hmong, migrated here from neighbouring countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to escape oppression. Many people belonging to these groups are registered as stateless by the Thai government, and social and geographical isolation have allowed them to

From left: Hiking in Chiang Rai; white smoke curls from Lo-Ue's 72-year-old Probatino roaster; Lo-Ue cools the coffee beans by tossing them into the air at Suan Lahu farm

IMAGES: GETTY; JUSTIN MENEGUZZI

maintain their own distinctive cultures, languages and belief systems.

Lo-Ue counts himself among the Black Lahu, the dominant family in the Lahu community, who number around 60,000 in Thailand. Originally from the Tibetan plateau, the Black Lahu still maintain their oral storytelling traditions and typically live in matrilocal societies, in which the husband goes to live in his new wife's village soon after marriage.

Around a hundred people live in Lo-Ue's village, Doi Mod, a motley collection of tin-roofed stilt huts scattered along the mountain face close to where we're roasting coffee. It's a place where dogs doze on porches while free-range roosters scratch in the dust. Bright-pink Dora the Explorer T-shirts hang out to dry, overlooking a sacred arena that has witnessed countless barefoot dances and animal sacrifices. Electricity is limited and, until recently, residents washed their plates at a single communal tap. Like many other hill tribes eking out a living, the Black Lahu once grew opium as a cash crop. Since the 1990s, with both support and enforcement from the Thai government, their mainstays have been rice, flowers, soybeans and corn.

Thailand's northern hill tribes have long drawn hikers for visits and overnight stays — typically with a voyeuristic slant, observing the families at arm's length. By contrast, at Suan Lahu farm, guests get a far more immersive experience, learning about sustainable farming practices while also lending a helping hand. The farm even offers a basic apartment with views overlooking the valley for those wanting to extend their stay. The exact activities travellers can help with — from harvesting to weeding to roasting the coffee beans — vary depending on the season, but each visit carries a guaranteed taste of the final product.

Lo-Ue hands me an espresso to sip. It's smoother than the stuff I'm used to at home and lacks the acidic bitterness. He explains this is the result of careful cultivation and offers to show me more on a guided uphill hike across the farm's 14 hectares. As I pause to catch my breath on the steep slopes, Lo-Ue points out white-flowering coffee trees alongside shaggy pepper trees and avocado trees drooping with fruit. I can make out the faint scent of a cinnamon tree that's recently had its bark peeled. The trees look like they're scattered in a completely random pattern, but there's method in this wilderness: Lo-Ue calls it forest farming.

Instead of manipulating nature to create manicured rows of produce as you'd see in large-scale commercial farms, forest farming is a practice designed to sustain the ecosystem by supporting the pollinators, birdlife, insects and other animals who live within it. The result, says Lo-Ue, is a healthier environment in which to grow crops. Passing beneath the dappled light of slender teak trees, he explains how Arabica coffee thrives in shaded environments. As he walks me through the production process, he introduces me to the pigs whose manure is used for fertiliser and the bees who flit between coffee flowers to produce honey in the farm's apiary.

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From left: A woman waters flowers at a flower farm outside Doi Mod village, where most families rely on farming to make an income; bees from the Suan Lahu apiary collect pollen from the coffee plants and surrounding vegetation to produce honey for the farm

IMAGES: JUSTIN MENEGUZZI

We eventually emerge at a look-out spot with a view across the valley. On the slopes of the opposite mountain, above a shaded edible fern farm, a corn farmer has cut back his crops to reveal a desolate slope that stands in stark contrast to the surrounding greenery. It's a vivid demonstration of slash-and-burn agricultural techniques that are common here, which can make mountains more susceptible to landslides, according to the United Nation's Food & Agriculture Organization. Burning agricultural waste also contributes significantly to the pervasive smog that hangs over northern Thailand in March. The week before I arrive, Chiang Mai beat Delhi and Lahore to earn the dubious honour of the world's most polluted city.

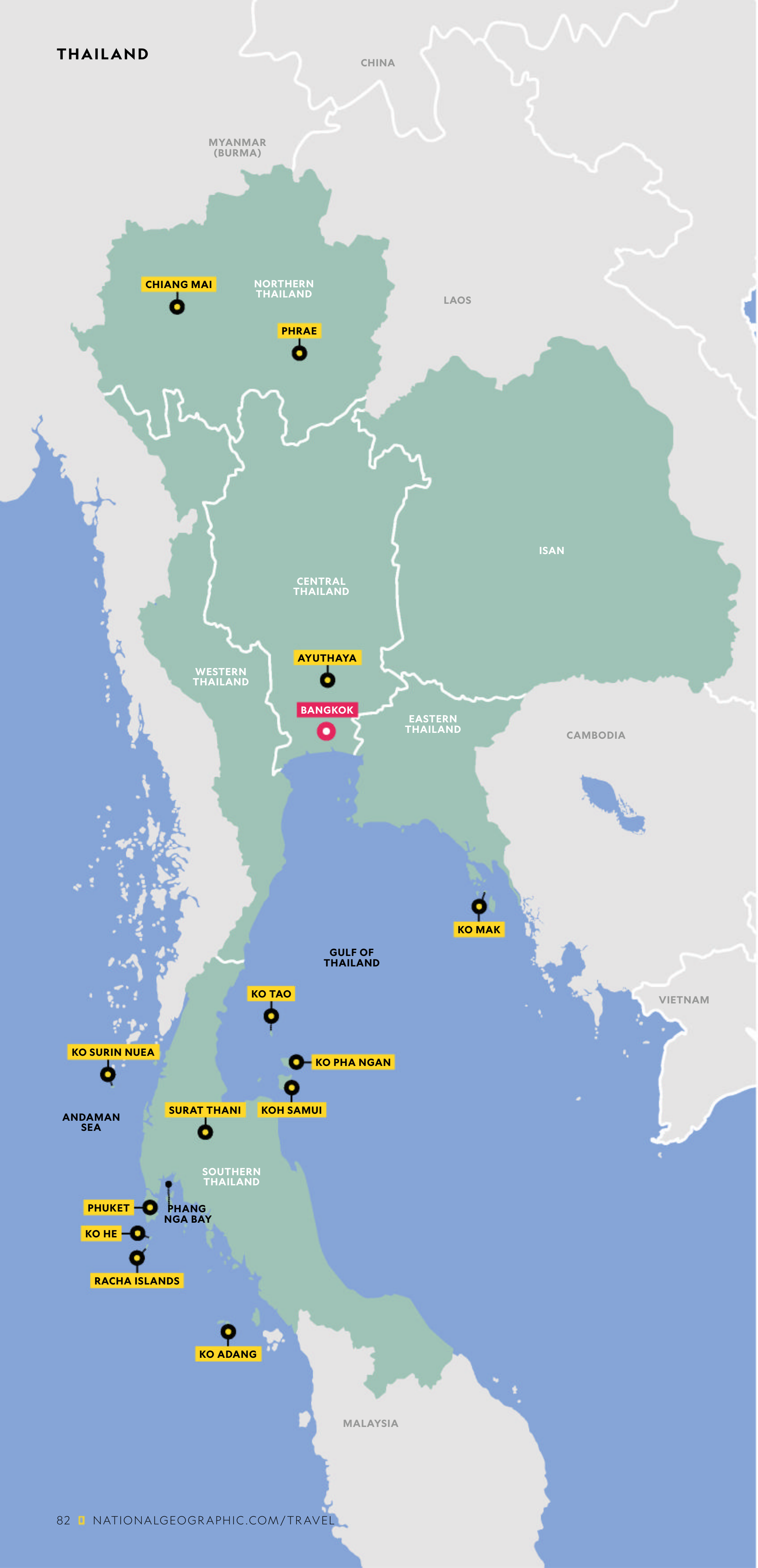
Lo-Ue tells me this is the reason he and his brother, Jakhadtè, founded Suan Lahu. Detractors warned it was impossible to farm organically in the mountains, but after 14 years, Lo-Ue is proud to host educational workshops and festivals to help other hill tribe communities adopt more sustainable farming practices. And what's good for the soil is good for the people, too. The farm has invested its profits back into the Black Lahu community, recently upgrading the number of water taps in the local village from one to three.

On our way back to the farm for lunch, Lo-Ue introduces me to his most exciting innovation: a burnt-out metal drum that looks like an imploded R2-D2 model. This is where he produces biochar, a soil enhancer made by incinerating crops and other organic matter using a process that generates significantly less smoke and carbon dioxide. The resulting product enriches the microbes in the farm's soil. Lo-Ue tells me that if he can convince more farmers to make and use biochar, it could go a long way towards improving air quality in the region.

For now, I'm breathing easy thanks to an unexpected storm that rolled over the mountains and scrubbed the air the previous night. Looking down over the valley while cradling a long black coffee, I spy the burgundy huts of Doi Mod village peeking out from behind the dark undergrowth far below and can't help but think of the microbes, worms, caterpillars, bees and pigs between us, all sheltered and fed thanks to Lo-Ue's coffee trees.

How to do it: Thai Airways links Bangkok with destinations across Europe, with onward domestic flights and trains connecting to Chiang Mai. Green Trails runs socially responsible tours to hill tribe communities in northern Thailand, including to Suan Lahu farm. Private tours of Suan Lahu farm start from 4,800 TH (£106) for two people and include transport from Chiang Mai, coffee-tasting, activities, a tour of Doi Mod village and lunch. Overnight village stays can also be arranged on request. thaiairways.com green-trails.com suanlahu.org

THAILAND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KO ADANG
MALAYSIA

GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways, Thai Airways and Eva Air have direct flights from London to Bangkok. TUI operates direct flights to Phuket from Gatwick and Manchester between November and April. ba.com thaiairways.com evaair.com tui.co.uk

Average flight time: 12h.

Thailand has an excellent network of low-cost airlines with multiple connections per day to the islands and dozens of other regional airports from Bangkok. Try Thai Smile, Bangkok Airways, Nok Air or AirAsia. thaismileair.com bangkokair.com nokair.com airasia.com

The country's trains tend to move slowly but are reliable and excellent value for money. A number of boats and ferries offer transfers to the islands from southern cities like Surat Thani, but booking online can be very difficult. Instead, try an agent, such as 12Go. Thailand's poor road safety record means buses and self-drive options (particularly motorbikes) are best avoided. Download the Grab app for taxi rides. dticket.railway.co.th 12go.asia grab.com

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Thailand is between November and March, when the weather is hot and sunny but less humid. Temperatures rise significantly in April and May, before the monsoon rains, with averages into the high 30Cs. During the May-to-October monsoon, travel around Thailand's southern Andaman Coast can be severely restricted, with ferry services reduced or stopped. The north's agricultural-burning season is an increasing issue, damaging the air quality in this region between January and March.

MORE INFO

Thailand Tourism. tourismthailand.org

Fodor's Essential Thailand, £17.99

Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture, Philip Cornwel-Smith, £20.

HOW TO DO IT

Inside Asia can tailor-make a 10-night Bustling Bangkok to Beach trip, taking in Koh Samui, from £1,710 per person, B&B, including international flights with Etihad, domestic flights and transfers, breakfasts and some private tours. insideasiatours.com

Travelbag has a 10-night tour covering Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai from £1,809 per person, B&B, including return flights with Emirates, domestic flights and transfers. travelbag.co.uk ▯

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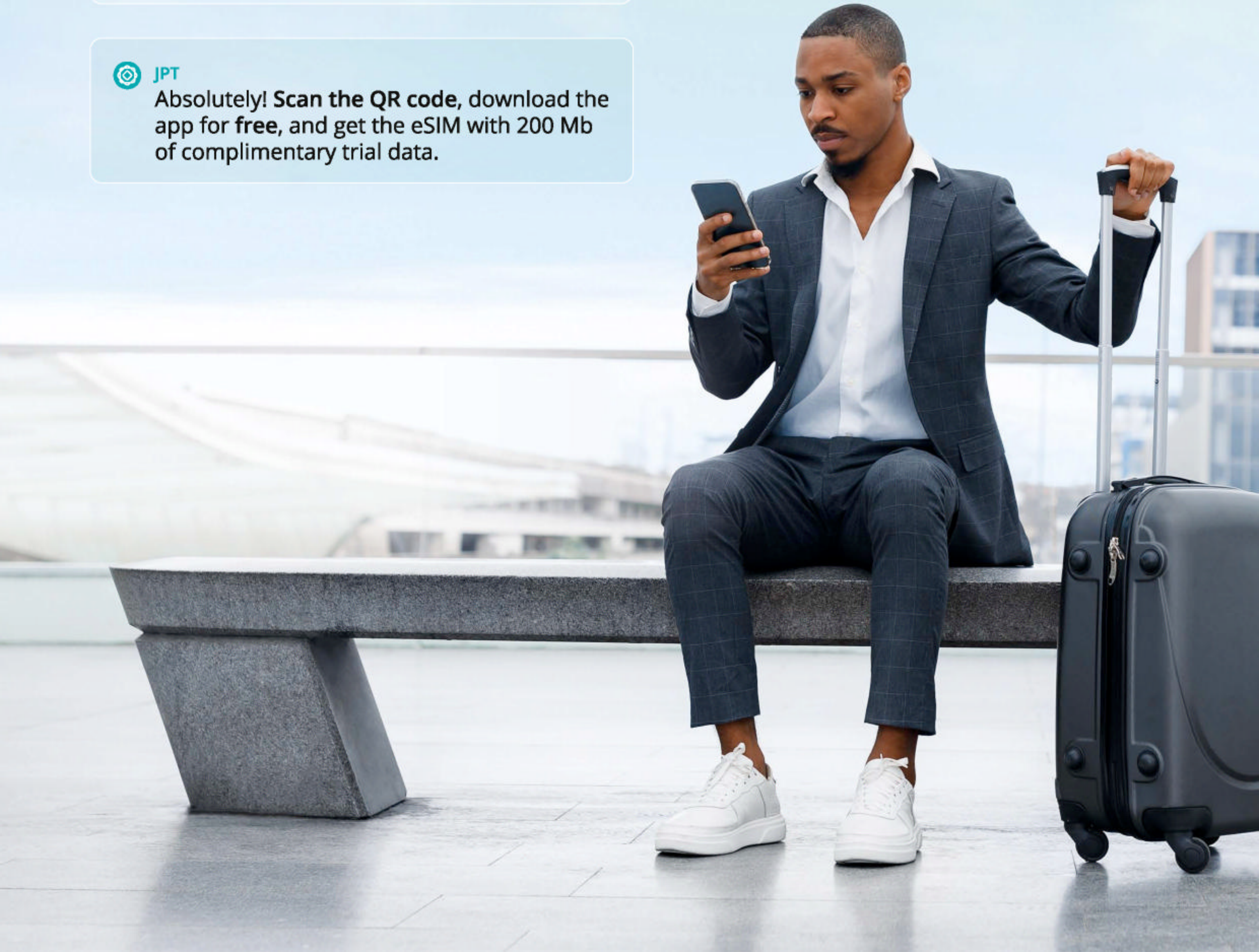

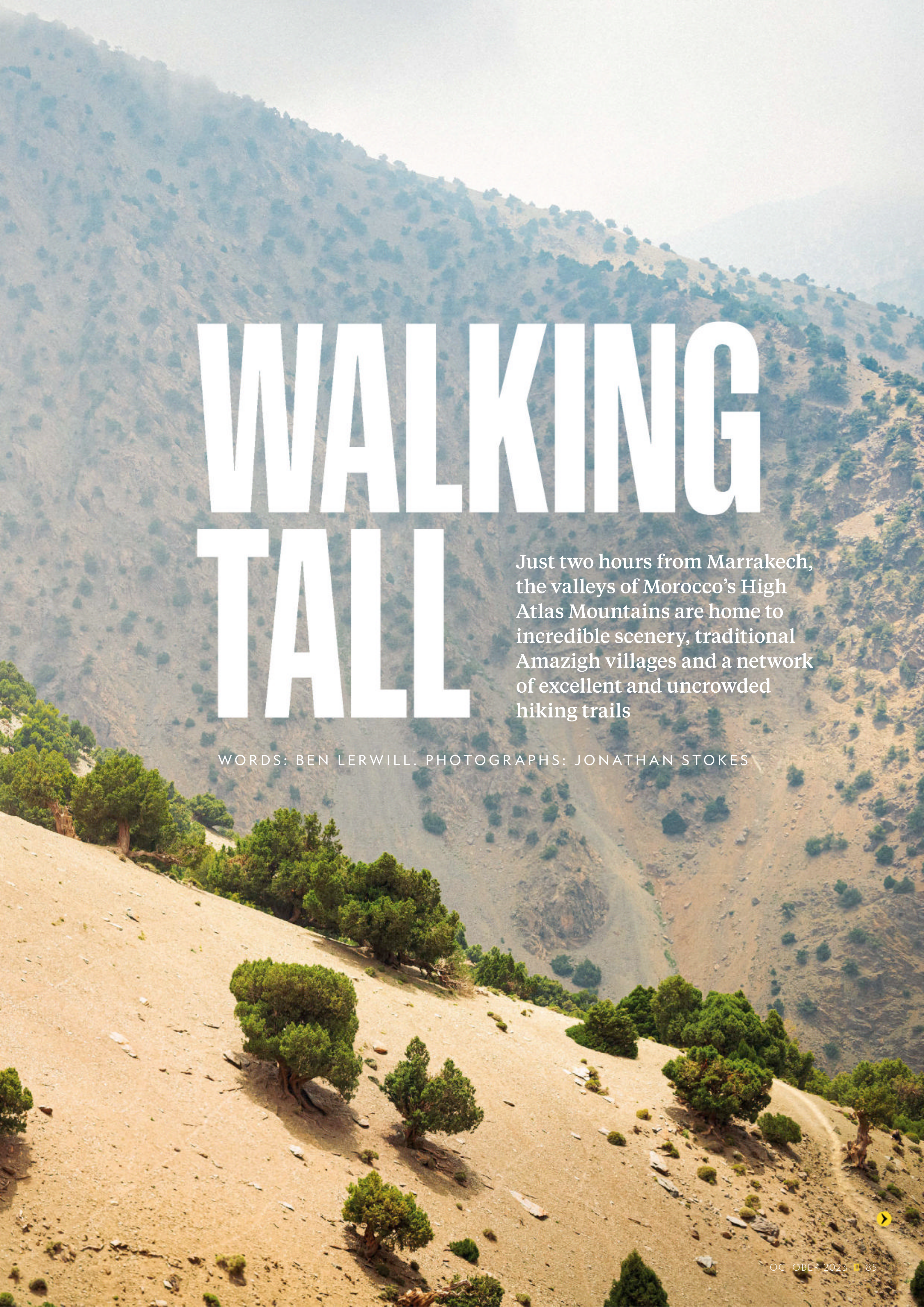

WALKING TALL

Just two hours from Marrakech, the valleys of Morocco's High Atlas Mountains are home to incredible scenery, traditional Amazigh villages and a network of excellent and uncrowded hiking trails

WORDS: BEN LERWILL. PHOTOGRAPHS: JONATHAN STOKES

Shortly after 4.30am, the day's first call to prayer drifts across the mountains. A gauzy predawn light hangs over the Ait Mizane Valley, where a dozen villages are scattered across the rough slopes. Each settlement has a small mosque and an early-rising muezzin, whose wavering invocations roll out into the morning air. Twelve voices flow from 12 minaret loudspeakers, filling the sleeping valley with a river of song. In two hours' time, the sky will be busy with swallows and the ridges will be washed in sunshine, but for now the mountains stir with hazy shapes and half-awake mantras.

In Morocco, proximity on the map can be misleading. The valley sits barely 40 miles from the city of Marrakech but may as well be on a different planet. If street-level Marrakech is a whirl of thronged souks and bleating taxis, Ait Mizane Valley is its slow-motion antidote. The main village, Imlil, is a place where the smell of freshly baked flatbread drifts on the air, where you can stroll from cafe to mountain stream in two minutes and where your gaze is routinely drawn to the craggy crests overhead. The traffic jams and snake charmers of the city feel a long way away.

I'm here to walk. The valley is located among the hulking summits of the High Atlas, a brawny mountain belt stretching for over 350 miles across the heart of the country. It's June, and the upper slopes are dry and biscuit-brown, while the lower slopes are lush with walnut trees. Peaks ring the scene, snow lingers in some of the highest cols and the ridges on the skyline are as jagged as torn paper. "The local name for the High Atlas is Idraren Draren," says whippet-fit guide Abdul Toudaoui, flashing a grin as he zips up his backpack. "It means 'the mountains of mountains'. People once thought they were the biggest in the world."

His easy manner is reassuring. Over the next few days, Abdul will be leading me and a small group on a long, round-trip hike along age-old shepherds' tracks and over a series of high passes, all above 2,210 metres. He knows the mountains here better than most. "I first reached the top of Mount Toubkal when I was 14," he says, pointing at the serrated, 4,167-metre peak visible to the south, the tallest mountain in North Africa. "I was with my older brother. It was hard, but it was very special. I've been back up there many times."

Hikers visiting Imlil often attempt the same two-day ascent of Toubkal (there's a base camp refuge near the summit), although the trails we'll be following this week head to other, quieter parts of the range, veering along steep mountainsides and winding between valleys. I arrive in Imlil late at night, when the village is shuttered and moonlit, but by the time we begin an exploratory walk into the foothills the next morning, the place is alive with pack-laden mules and chattering groups of schoolchildren. Sacks of mint and thyme stand outside a shop. A bored-looking police officer smokes a cigarette, and robins sing in the willow trees.

The valley, like the rest of the High Atlas range, is populated almost exclusively by the Amazigh people. Outsiders often refer to them as 'Berbers', but Abdul is clear on his preference. "The early Romans called us 'Berbers', which comes from 'barbarians'," he says, as we begin to climb past apple orchards towards the higher slopes. "Amazigh

Right: Imlil village, located at an altitude of 1,800 metres, is a popular base for High Atlas treks
Previous pages: Walkers make their way over sun-beaten slopes on a trail through the Azzaden Valley

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is much better. It means 'the free people'. We are Amazigh."

As we walk, I'm given an overview of the region's history. The Romans took control here over 2,000 years ago, Arabs followed in the seventh century and France imposed a protectorate on the country in 1912. The Amazigh — a historical amalgam of various North African ethnic groups — were living here long before any of them, and although they adopted Islam from the Arabs, they retain a distinct identity. "This is our flag," an Imlil shopkeeper tells me, showing me a tri-striped ensign emblazoned with a single red letter from the Amazigh alphabet. He points to the stripes. "Blue for the sea, green for the mountains, yellow for the desert," he says, then rests his finger on the emblem. "This is the most important part. We call this letter 'yaz'. It represents freedom."

The trail we're on follows the contours of hot, crumbly hills. We stop in the early afternoon at a glade of leafy trees, where Abdul's muleteer colleague, Mohammad Ait Idan, has lit a campfire and prepared a dish of spiced lentil stew and chicken skewers, accompanied by fresh salads and pillowy flatbreads. Mohammad's al fresco lunches will become a life-affirming highlight of the trip. Mules, too, play a significant part, carrying our provisions and luggage from valley to valley. After lunch, the mountain path we're following passes through a hillside village, where freshly washed rugs are being dried on rooftops as part of a spring clean in advance of the upcoming celebrations for the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha. Hens peck around mazy lanes and women in floor-length *djellaba* robes nod greetings from doorways. Beyond, terraced plots on the village outskirts hold rows of onions and courgettes. This sense of calm is typical of the settlements we'll pass throughout the trip.

The first day's walk brings us back to Imlil and our base at hilltop eco-lodge Kasbah du Toubkal. Once the home of a local chief, it was converted into upmarket accommodation in the 1990s. Film director Martin Scorsese chose it to double as a Himalayan monastery in his 1997 epic *Kundun*, which says plenty about the drama of the setting. "The hike starts properly tomorrow," says Abdul, standing in the courtyard and pointing at a long, dry climb in the distance. "We'll be heading right up there, *inshallah*. All the way to the Azzaden Valley."

Mountain highs

The Amazigh alphabet, commonly known as Tifinagh, is a singular-looking script full of circles and glyphs. As of 2011, the Tamazight language it's used in has been recognised as one of Morocco's official languages, alongside Arabic. When we begin climbing the next day, the script appears on signs at the trailside.

Clockwise from top: Walking trails in the High Atlas pass many remote villages; a public minibus arrives in Imlil; a picnic lunch for the hikers including meatball stew

The mountain path passes through a hillside village, where freshly washed rugs are being dried on rooftops as part of a spring clean in advance of the upcoming celebrations for the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha

The sense of remoteness builds. It's been hours since we last passed a house. The barren slopes, until now almost lunar, begin to grow green with wild juniper trees. Some of them are almost 300 years old

Its strange allure fits the giddy surroundings. The early morning is already warm, with woodpeckers swooping across the path and scraps of mist snagging at the mountains. When, after 90 minutes of uphill walking, we turn to see how far we've come, Imlil is already a speck far below.

The path continues, rising past scree and buckled rocks. The going is steep and we pass almost no one, so when we reach the 2,438-metre-high Tizi Mzik Pass it comes as both a shock and a blessing to find a stone cabin selling tea, snacks and freshly pressed orange juice. Its owner is Hassan Meskouk — baseball cap, half-smile, strong handshake — who's made the climb here with his mule almost daily since 1998. He buys his oranges at daybreak from the market in Imlil. "A quarter of a century ago, I built this hut with my hands," he says. From where we're standing, the views spill out to both the east and west. A flock of yellow-billed choughs rushes across the hillside. "I like being in nature. I come up every day, even in winter. There are hikers then, too. They need tea."

As we carry on, dosed up on vitamin C, the sense of remoteness builds. It's been hours since we last passed a house. The barren slopes, until now almost lunar, begin to grow green with juniper trees. Some of them, Abdul tells us, are almost 300 years old. They stand twisted but immutable on the sun-baked hillside, their roots lumpen and their bark stringy, with bowed branches and clustered needles. The path curves past hundreds of them. At ground level, far below us, yellow patches of broom and desert marigold shimmer in the heat.

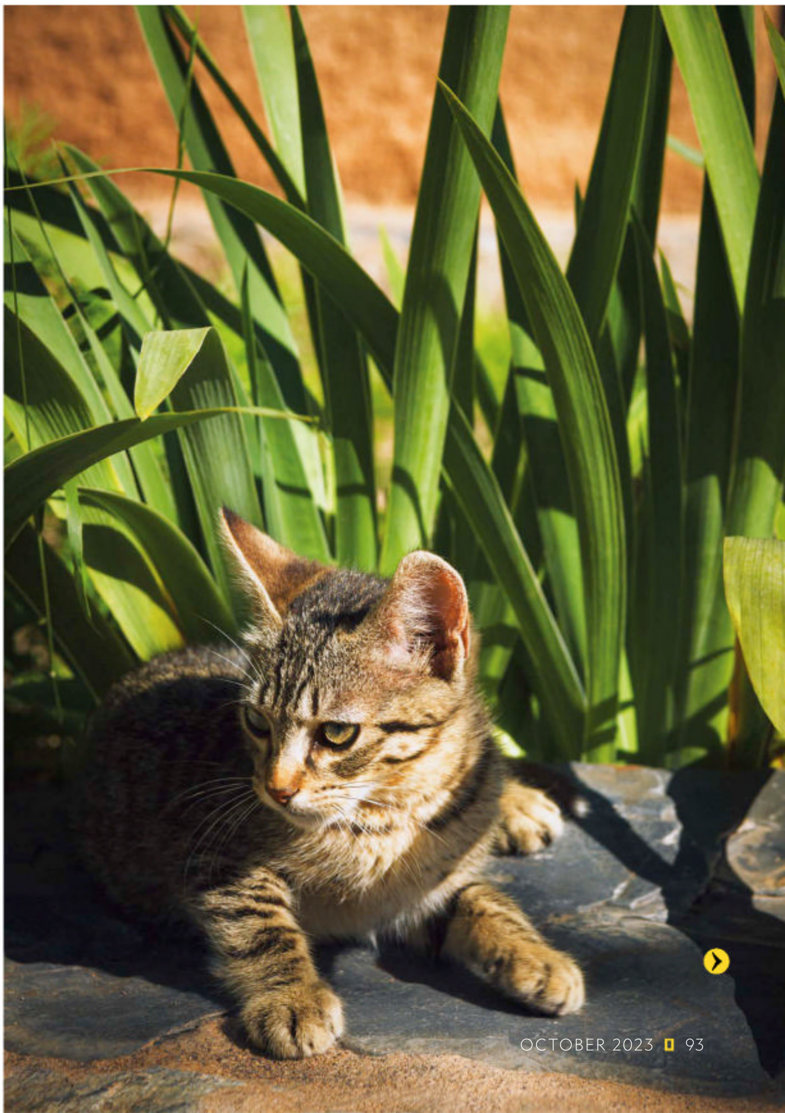
We eventually arrive at a giant cleft in the land, where the mountains become more textured and folded. The white-noise roar of the 55-metre-high Tamsoult waterfall betrays the cascade's presence before we see it, plummeting down slick cliffs, sending spray ghosting into the afternoon. We linger next to it in the shade, enjoying the cool. When we turn to leave, the Azzaden Valley is spread out in front of us, wide and rippled, a whole world of terraced hills and minaret-studded farming hamlets. We pass an old man wearing a *taqiyah* skullcap, riding a mule. As we disappear down the trail, he starts singing into the hills.

Our goal for the night is the Azzaden Trekking Lodge, perched above the village of Ait Aissa. The valley here is less visited than the one Imlil sits in, its contours a little wilder. Recovering from the day's exertion — replenished by a bubbling tagine and homegrown vegetables — we sit on the lodge balcony as the stars appear one by one. The dusk is purple and full of toad and cricket song. Dogs bark into the vastness of the valley. Thick layers of cut grass, destined to become winter hay, are spread over the village's flat rooftops. From the lodge, we can see at least four distant villages, and when the day's penultimate call to prayer comes just before 9pm, one of the far-off minarets glows like a beacon, outlined in flashing lights. Later, the Milky Way appears overhead, a plume across the heavens.

Eyes on the future

According to global human rights organisation the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, as much as 70% of Morocco's population claims at least partial Amazigh heritage. Less than half of that

Clockwise from top left: Eco-lodge Kasbah du Toubkal, high in the mountains; traditional Moroccan tea is poured on the terrace; a local cat pays a visit; cushioned comfort inside the lodge
Previous pages, from left: Hikers on a narrow path in the Azzaden Valley; Mohammad Ait Idan's chicken kebabs



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Above from left: Locals in Ait Aissa, a village located below the Azzaden Trekking Lodge, carrying dry grass to use as winter hay; painted doorway in the village

number speak a Tamazight dialect, however, and the valleys of the High Atlas represent one of the culture's traditional heartlands. The locals identify as Moroccan — they were hoarse with joy, along with the rest of the country, when the national team reached the FIFA World Cup semi-finals in December 2022 — but also view themselves as distinct from the mainstream.

We discover this the next day, when we break from a long, butterfly-rich walk down to the valley floor by visiting a family home in the village of Tizi iZggar. The settlement is small but neat, with sturdy mud-brick houses and flowerpots in open windows. Aisha Ait Adi ushers us in a motherly fashion into her first-floor reception room (the ground floor is given over to livestock, as is customary in rural Amazigh communities) and produces a steaming pot of mint tea. A small alcove holds a TV; hanging above it are her children's sports medals and a verse of scripture from the Qur'an. She's lived here for 30 years, she tells us as she carefully pours the tea.

"I have two sons and a daughter. They have opportunities that weren't possible for Amazigh youngsters when I was their age," she explains. "The valley is a different place now. Until 20 years ago, we had no electricity. The government put in irrigation channels around the same time, to help the crops. Roads have been built, too, so buses can travel to towns more easily — it means my daughter spends every week in high school, getting an education." Aisha places the teapot down. "Her future makes me happy."

Abdul remembers the arrival of electricity well. At the time, he was still at primary school, so found himself doing homework by candlelight one week and watching Tom and Jerry cartoons the next. "Our bedtimes changed too," he says, smiling. "We stayed up later. But the big change was having the world right there on the TV screen: politics, news, other countries. You can't imagine."

Aisha's daughter, meanwhile, is just one of many Amazigh girls benefiting from brighter employment prospects. A combination of government funding, tourist income and specialist charity work has enabled the communities of the High Atlas — which generally lack secondary schools of their own — to provide new options for young people.

One organisation leading the way is Education for All Morocco, which supports rural girls, helping them to continue into higher education by funding spots in boarding houses near schools. After a hike through deep-sided valleys, home to quince trees and crowing cockerels, we return to the Azzaden Trekking Lodge to meet two young women benefitting from this initiative. Cousins Selma and Hafsa

Cousins Selma and Hafsa Ait Hmad at the Azzaden Trekking Lodge

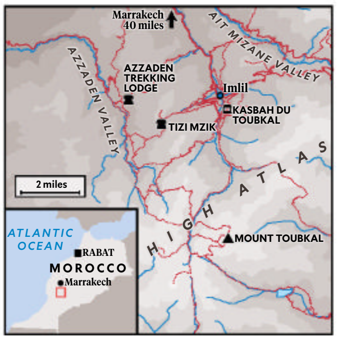
Ait Hmad, aged 20 and 19, respectively, grew up in the valley. They've just finished their time at high school in the foothill town of Asni, and will shortly start at university in Marrakech.

The pair are bright-eyed and chatty. They finish each other's sentences and volunteer *Stranger Things* and Adele as two of their favourite things. Selma plans to study engineering; Hafsa hopes to become a French teacher. They fizz with optimism but are realistic, too. "My engineering course is six years long," Selma tells me. "But it's my dream. I need to be patient for it." They talk about the pros and cons of rural and urban life: "The city has more possibilities," Hafsa says. "It's easier to make a future." And they discuss the changes they'd like to see in the region. "I want the valley to have its own high school and a proper hospital," says Selma.

Their energy is contagious — which is just as well at this stage of the walk. The following day, Abdul leads us on a long, serpentine path back to the Ait Mizane Valley, where our journey began. Juniper trees stud the route, giant shoulders of red rock jut overhead and rumpled slopes yawn into the distance. Fat beetles range through the dust at my boots. The trail itself feels somehow ancient, and I find myself imagining the feet of numberless traders and goatherds plodding the same track over the centuries. I ask Abdul if he can put a date on the age of the path. "Yes," he says. "It opened six months ago. Government money."

Back in Imlil, we return to the Kasbah du Toubkal for two more nights — a chance to put the hiking poles to one side and adjust the pace of the trip to sedentary. I split my time between the soap-and-scrub of the Kasbah's traditional hammam and the blockbuster view from its rooftop terrace, which not only faces the summit of Jebel Toubkal but gives a wraparound lookout over the whole valley. Like the rest of the High Atlas, the granite and sandstone peaks here have been forged over hundreds of millions of years. It's a timescale to dwell on over your pre-dinner olives.

In my last conversation with Abdul, our chat turns to the old man we'd seen singing two days earlier. "I know this man," he says with a laugh. "He knows many Amazigh songs from the past. He's like a kind of poet — the words always have lots of deeper meanings." I smile at the thought of the man plodding up the road, serenading the mountains as baffled foreign hikers stride past. "This is something very important for us," says Abdul. "Today, even with all the progress, we have to keep the old ways alive." ◻



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways flies to Marrakech from Gatwick, EasyJet flies from Gatwick, Luton and Manchester, and Ryanair flies from Edinburgh, Manchester and Stansted. ba.com easyjet.com ryanair.com

Average flight time: 3h45m.

It takes 1.5 to two hours to travel from Marrakech to Imlil by road. Pre-book a taxi from the airport or take a *grand taxi* (taxis not confined to the city) from Marrakech itself. The Kasbah du Toubkal is a 15-minute uphill walk from Imlil; help is provided with bags. marrakechairporttransfer.com

WHEN TO GO

The High Atlas can be as much as 15C cooler than Marrakech, which makes much of the spring-to-autumn window viable for a hiking trip. High summer can reach 28C, so June and September either side are particularly appealing. Spring (20C) is an attractive option for wildflowers and walnut blossom.

WHERE TO STAY

Kasbah du Toubkal. Doubles from 1,925 MAD (£151), B&B. kasbahtoubkal.com

Azzaden Trekking Lodge. Doubles from 2,310 MAD (£182), half board. highatlastrekkinglodge.com

MORE INFORMATION

visitmorocco.com

HOW TO DO IT

Responsible travel specialist YellowWood Adventures offers a nine-day Hiking Morocco's High Atlas Mountains tour from £1,495 per person. It includes transfers from Marrakech, local guides, stays at Kasbah du Toubkal and Azzaden Trekking Lodge, most meals (including picnic lunches on the hikes), a guided tour of Marrakech and all hiking trails. Flights are not included. There's also an optional summit attempt of Jebel Toubkal in the summer. Group sizes are between six and 12 people. yellowwoodadventures.com

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WORDS: ADRIAN PHILLIPS
PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR

From left: Pouring glasses of Plavac Mali wine at Edivo Winery; Split's historic core was built around Diocletian's Palace

Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Bottles of Plavic Mali wine at Edivo Winery; view along Stradun, the main street in the Old Town of Dubrovnik; shucking oysters in Mali Ston Bay; Ston Saltworks

Four frogs with violins gather beneath a window to serenade another frog in a dress. You don't see that every day. Nor a frog being shaved in a barber's shop. "People are so obsessed with technology, it can be tough to get them interested in frogs," says my guide Marina Bitunjac, as we ponder a scene in which one of the amphibious creatures balances a boot on his nose.

You'll find 507 such stuffed frogs in Split's Froggyland, arranged in a series of tableaux by taxidermist Ferenc Mere in the early 1900s. The various scenes on display include court cases, sporting contests and school lessons. One is titled 'Construction work on a holiday home' and features frog bricklayers, roofers and a site manager taking a pee behind a wall. Exhibits are accompanied by a soundtrack of ribbits set to music. It's utterly surreal.

I knew I'd love Split. The Dalmatian city is the first stop on a road trip I'm taking along the Croatian coast to Dubrovnik. Friends had raved about its Roman architecture, medieval bell towers and harbourside restaurants. But they hadn't mentioned its fabulous eccentricities. After Froggyland, Marina takes me to rub Gregory of Nin's big toe. Gregory was a revered 10th-century bishop, and touching the toe of his 28ft-tall bronze statue, burnished gold by millions of fingers, is said to bring good luck. "Make a wish," says Marina (I wish for hand sanitiser) before we continue through the north gate of Diocletian's Palace.

The fourth-century complex is the lively, lived-in heart of Split's Old Town. Male quartets perform a cappella folk songs; neighbours call to each other across courtyards from windows linked by tightropes of washing. We reach the central square, abuzz with tourists, and Emperor Diocletian himself appears, announced by his imperial guard with a flurry of marching feet and a trumpeting fanfare. "*Ave!*" he cries from the raised terrace that led to his living quarters, and we look up and shout "*Ave!*" in reply. There's more trumpeting and another flurry of marching as the actors withdraw in their robes and sandals, and the throng of tourists in their T-shirts and flip-flops starts flowing once more through the arteries of the palace.

Fast forward a day — and 900 years — and I'm in the company of a 12th-century duchess. I've driven 15 miles south east to the town of Omiš, where the Cetina River meets the Adriatic Sea. Senka Vlahovic, who runs tour company Boho Travel Art, is wearing a medieval-style dress so substantial it threatens to sweep up anyone we pass on the pavement. But nobody bats an eyelid as she sails through the alleyways. "They're used to seeing me like this," she explains. "I've been doing this for years."

Once upon a time, Senka tells me, Omiš was a hotbed of pirates, who controlled the coast from Split to Dubrovnik. These weren't the yo-ho-ho-and-a-bottle-of-rum types — the pirate leaders belonged to the noble Kačić family, and their pirating was as much about projecting power as looting booty. For over 200 years, any ship that ventured into the Adriatic had to pay a tribute or risk the consequences.

The landscape adds to the sense of maritime drama. Grey mountains rise abruptly behind the town, pressing it towards the sea, and the Cetina River bleeds from a canyon cleaved deep and dark in the karst. I drive into the valley along a narrow road, the woods thickening, until I reach a chunky building said to have been a hideout of the Omiš pirates. Today, it's a restaurant called Kaštil Slanica, which serves the sorts of food they'd have eaten: earthy-tasting Cetina trout, snails, meat baked over embers under an iron dome called a *peka*. I try a plate of breaded frogs' legs and hope it hasn't left the holiday-home construction site short of workers.

The pirate leaders were defeated by the forces of the Venetian Republic at the end of the 13th century, but others keep the torch of adventure alive in the canyon. Duje Cerina and

Karlo Bartulovic, who meet me after lunch, truss me up in a harness and lead me along a track that climbs through the forest to the lip of the canyon. From there, a wire stretches across the abyss to an endpoint so far away you'd need Blackbeard's telescope to make it out. We've reached the first of eight zip-lines running back and forth over the valley like some hellish giant's cross-stitch.

"This is the longest and highest zip-line of the lot," announces Duje, and I nod politely and look around for the shorter, closer-to-the-ground line we'll be riding. "It's 800ft above the river and you'll travel at 70mph for nearly half a mile," continues Karlo as he hooks my harness to the cable and the bones in my legs become rubbery. "You aren't scared of heights, are you?" asks Duje — a question I'd like to suggest he should have asked earlier, but my throat is tight with nerves. I dangle for a moment above the ground, knees raised and ankles crossed, strung like a plucked chicken, before the brake is released and I shoot away in a whirr of pulley on wire until I'm just a screaming speck in the distance to the onlooking Duje and Karlo.

Later, I head further into the gorge for more adventuring, this time on a yellow inflatable raft in the charge of a broad-chested and kind-eyed action man called Stefan Baric. The owner of Rafting Pinta, he's led excursions on the Cetina for 25 years. He's perched me at the front, the best seat in the house. The water is golden-green and so flat I'm reluctant to disturb it with my paddle. We drift through avenues of maples and willows, as though pulled along on a silk ribbon, and Stefan points out sandstone banks with holes made by bee-eaters, and a long-tailed bird with a lilting flight that reminds me of calligraphy.

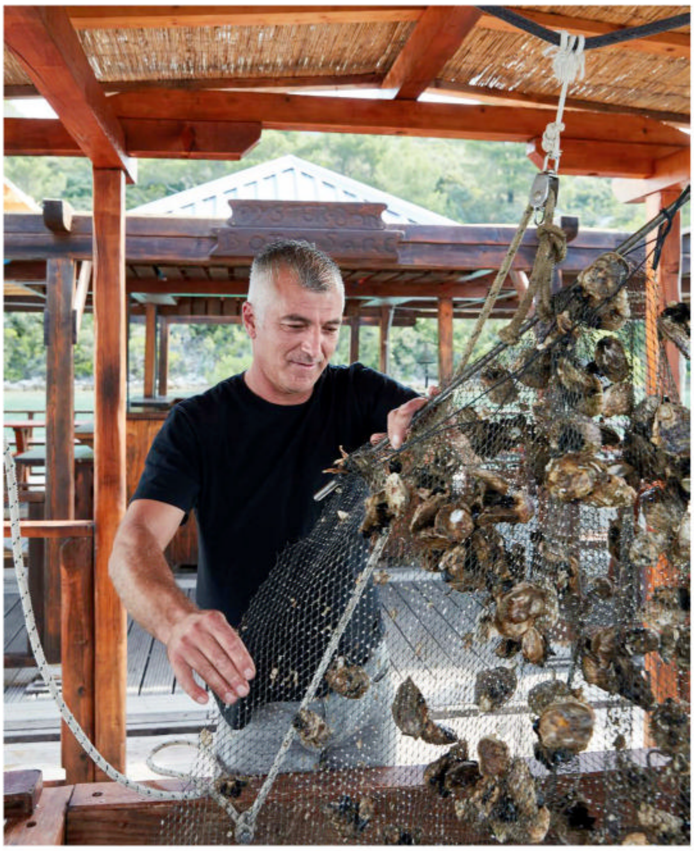
But it's all a deception. Ahead, the water becomes agitated at a clutch of rocks, swirls and bubbles around a boulder and finally collapses down a six-foot drop in a temper of whitewater. Stefan issues orders from the back of the raft — paddle hard left, paddle hard right — using his own paddle as a rudder. We bump across the rocks and lever around the boulder, and then we're into the stomach-lurching drop, the nose of the raft hitting the surface and shovelling up a wave that engulfs me, before washing meekly along the the raft to wet Stefan's ankles. "Wow, it's cold," he says, shaking a foot, while I flap and gasp like the bedraggled victim of a keelhauling.

There are more sedate ways to explore Croatia's coast, however. I backtrack a few miles to Gornja Podstrana, where I meet Mateo Barnic. He grew up in this ancient mountainside village and recently founded Horseback Riding Podstrana. I follow him on a white-hoofed mare through gnarled oaks and scrubby grass chequered with weathered stones that once marked the boundaries of the villagers' farmland. There must have been easier spots to farm, but Mateo explains that the steep slopes offered refuge from the pirates below. "Lazier families built closer to the coast," he says, "and perhaps they were right — their land is worth far more today." Just 50 people live in the old village, the houses crumbling around them — but the joy of those sea views surely never fades.

Bridging the gap

I continue my journey southwards beneath karst peaks and hilltop churches, and past roadside vendors selling jams in a rainbow of colourful jars. I stop at the top of Mount Biokovo and inch out onto the Skywalk, a glass-floored walkway jutting from the cliff face, and anchor myself to the guard rail as a pair of children jump up and down to see if the glass will crack.

At the village of Komarna, a sliver of Bosnia-Herzegovina severs the Dalmatian belt. Until a year ago, those wanting to visit Croatia's southern tip had to endure time-wasting border checkpoints to leapfrog out of the country and back in again. Now, though,



From left: Kayaking around the fort walls of the old town in Dubrovnik; pulling up rope-grown oysters on the boat trip run by Bota Šare out to the oyster beds in Mali Ston Bay

“At the top of Mount Biokovo, I inch out onto the Skywalk, a glass-floored walkway jutting from the cliff face, and anchor myself to the guard rail as a pair of children jump up and down to see if the glass will crack”

The Skywalk viewing platform at the top of Mount Biokovo

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The harbour in the town of Makarska, near the Skywalk
Left: traditional Dalmatian bread made at Kastil Slanica in Omiš

> “Around here, if you’re no good at learning you become a priest, a politician or a fisherman,” Daniel says, straight-faced

the elegant new Pelješac Bridge leads on to the Pelješac Peninsula and the road to Dubrovnik.

The 40-mile peninsula isn’t just a piece of connective tissue. The town of Ston has Europe’s longest intact medieval fortifications, five miles of them, built to protect Europe’s oldest saltworks at a time when salt was as valuable as gold. I walk the 14th-century walls and visit salt pools that have been sun-baked and hand-raked since 2000 BCE. I make time for a piece of traditional Ston cake: pastry filled with chocolate, walnut and macaroni.

From the sea

Less than a mile north east is a village of oyster farmers. The houses of Mali Ston gather at the edge of a sheltered bay, where I board a smart, old-fashioned clipper. In the wheelhouse, wearing snazzy sunglasses and a crushed linen shirt, is Daniel Separovic, a man who’s farmed oysters since abandoning school at 15. “Around here, if you’re no good at learning you become a priest, a politician or a fisherman,” he says, straight-faced. “Now, let’s start with some medicine,” he goes on, handing me a glass of herbal grappa the shade of straw. I wince as I swallow and he pours me another. “The second always tastes better.”

Daniel works for Bota Šare, a family business, harvesting 100,000 oysters a year to serve in its four restaurants. Mali Ston Bay has just what an oyster needs: a cool, impeccably clean cocktail of phytoplankton-dense, brackish water. “Put anything into this water and something will grow on it,” says Daniel, laying anchor and tugging up a rope full of oysters, attached back to back along its length like bells on a Morris dancer’s stick. It’s taken two-and-a-half years to get to this point — a process that involves snagging baby oysters in a small net, moving them to a larger one to mature and, finally, attaching them to the rope. Which is why I don’t mention to Daniel that I’ve never quite seen the appeal of them. He shucks a few with practised twists of his knife, and I slurp them back and say what he wants to hear: that they’re subtle and minerally and far better than oysters from France.

Mussels, on the other hand, are very much my bag. Daniel pulls a sausage-shaped net of them from the water, picks out their frilly beards and empties the shells into a pot over a gas stove. “You cook mussels with fire only,” he declares, before giving a conspiratorial wink and adding a mammoth glug of wine. After two minutes and a drizzle of olive oil, the mussels are in my bowl, plump and sweet. This is a proper sea-to-spoon experience. “Mussels must drink three times,” says Daniel, filling a large wine glass. “Sea water when they’re on the rope, wine when in the pot, and more wine when in your stomach.”

Wine runs through the veins of those who live on the Pelješac Peninsula. Dispatches from Venetian diplomats in the 16th century waxed lyrical about vineyards near Ston, and today scores of local winemakers build on a heritage that dates back to the ancient Illyrians. But there are innovators here, too, and the next day I join one of them as he

The view from Mount Srd across Dubrovnik's walled Old Town and harbour

strips to his pants, wiggles into a wetsuit and disappears under the sea with a thumbs-up.

Edi Bajurin emerges in a mess of bubbles and clambers on board our boat with what looks like a torpedo tucked under his arm. He holds it out: an amphora, its terracotta surface encrusted with seashells. Inside is wine from Croatia's only underwater winery.

Back at their tasting room in the village of Drače, Edi and fellow founder of Edivo Winery, Ivo Secovic, sit me down to a spread of anchovies and indigenous Noah's Ark clams. In the middle of the table is the upper half of a Roman amphora that Edi recovered from the seabed. "I find lots of them, just sticking up in the sand," he tells me. They inspired an idea that's consumed the men for over a decade.

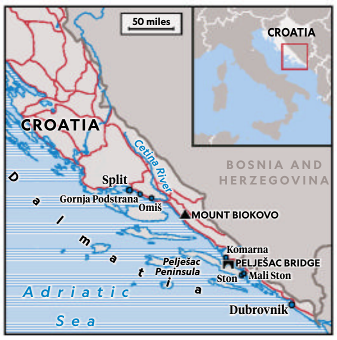
Their quest was to create something that captured the peninsula's geography and history: wine stored in amphoras, aged in the cool depths of the Adriatic. They had to find the perfect spot in Mali Ston Bay; the perfect balance of indigenous Plavac Mali grapes, from various vineyards, each with its slightly different character; the perfect material to make and seal the amphoras against salt water; and they had to work out how to clean them up after two years in the sea. "We wanted to leave the shells on the amphoras, but that presented a problem," says Ivo. "They smell like dead bodies after a few days," adds Edi.

Eventually, like vinicultural Goldilockses, they developed a red wine not too strong, not too weak, but just right. It's characterful, with a fruity and complex flavour.

It's an hour's drive to my final stop, the city of Dubrovnik. While the afternoon matures and hundreds of swifts gun for insects, Marijeta Radic — a whirlwind of a guide, tripping over herself with eagerness to share her fondness for the place — takes me on a tour. A handsome place, with imposing walls and limestone streets worn smooth by time, it remained independent for 500 years when most of the region was under the yoke of the Venetian Republic or Ottoman empire.

We stroll along the old city's main avenue, Stradun, past shops displaying artworks, antiques and the *Game of Thrones* merchandise that has become so popular since the series was filmed here. And there's drama enough without fiction. Marijeta describes how the sea rages against the walls in winter and tells me about the apocalyptic earthquake of 1667, when boulders crashed down from Mount Srđ. She pauses at a paving stone scarred with shrapnel from Serb bombing during the 1990s siege of Dubrovnik and remembers the years she spent in a refugee hotel with her family, eight of them to a room.

The tales continue to come, thick and fast, just as they have throughout my trip. I've heard about emperors, frogs and pirates; I've met those who try and try again. "Stories are all around you," Marijeta concludes as we part ways. "You just need to know where to look." ◻



GETTING THERE & AROUND

You can fly into Split and out of Dubrovnik, but — given it only takes three hours to drive between them — it can be cheaper to book a return flight from the same airport. Several carriers operate regular routes from the UK to Split and Dubrovnik, including British Airways, Croatia Airlines, EasyJet and Wizz Air. There are currently no flights from the UK to Dubrovnik in winter. ba.com croatiaairlines.com easyjet.com wizzair.com

Several car hire companies have offices at Split and Dubrovnik airports, including Nova Rent a Car. novarentacar.hr

WHEN TO GO

High season comes in July and August, when the sea is warm and there's a party atmosphere along the Dalmatian coast, but accommodation is at a premium. The crowds are thinner in late spring and early autumn when accommodation rates drop and the weather is still pleasant, often in the mid-20Cs.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Santa Lucia, Split. Doubles from €225 (£190), B&B. hotelsantalucia-central.com

Hotel Ostrea, Mali Ston. Doubles from €125 (£112), B&B. ostrea.hr

Valamar Lacroma Dubrovnik. Doubles from €199 (£170), B&B. valamar.com

MORE INFO

croatia.hr
dalmatia.hr
tzdubrovnik.hr

HOW TO DO IT

Unforgettable Croatia has a seven-night Croatia Active Culinary Trip from £1,695 per person, including flights from Gatwick, private transfers, accommodation in Split and Dubrovnik and various activities, tastings and tours. unforgettablecroatia.co.uk

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

Photo: Marius Rua

Rush hour

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EXPLORE
TRØNDELAG

ON CLOUD NINE

Scattered across the Arctic, in boggy moorland and on mountain slopes, the cloudberry appears for just a few weeks a year. It's so rare and precious, it's often called 'Arctic gold'. And, while it grows wild across the Arctic Circle and Norwegian Vesterålen archipelago, the specific locations where it thrives are a closely guarded local secret

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: ANNAPURNA MELLOR

On the island of Andøya, a stream of locals walk and cycle down an unsigned dirt road, buckets in hand. Across the peat-rich moorland, backed by the misty peak of Ørnlitnden, they hunt for the elusive golden cloudberry — known locally as *molte* or *multe*. They grow on single stems just a few centimetres from the ground and are sparsely scattered across the boggy land. Searching for them is a challenge, but it's also a tradition and an important summer activity for locals, who often take time off work during the short window of perfect ripeness. The tart berry is rich in vitamin C and antioxidants, providing important nutrients for people living in the harsh Arctic conditions.

The white-sand beaches of Bleik are linked by a Scenic Route (one of 18 such roads in Norway) that stretches along Andøya's entire west coast. The island's southern marshlands are some of the best locations for cloudberry hunting, as are the steep slopes of the mountains in the interior. These include the spectacular Måtinden, which offers views across Andøya. In summer, the midnight sun makes this island a 24-hour outdoor paradise, with the warm light of 'golden hour' hitting the coastline in the early hours of the morning. This constant daylight means the *molte* ripen fast — it can be a race to pick the berries at their best.

Cloudberries hold cultural importance for many communities across the Arctic region. Laila Inga is a reindeer herder and Indigenous Sámi living on the island of Hinnøya, in the Vesterålen region. She collects cloudberries from her own marshland, as the Sami people have done for generations. Cloudberries aren't only an important source of food and essential vitamins for the Sami, they were also used in traditional medicine, for example as a cure for scurvy. Knowing where to find the best picking locations is part of Indigenous knowledge that's passed down through generations.

After the harvest, locals take buckets of golden cloudberries home, to be made into jams and desserts and preserved or frozen to be used throughout the year. Here, in her kitchen in Andenes, the largest settlement on Andøya, islander Siren Nymo mixes the berries with sugar to create a quick compote, which is eaten on toast or used to top a cake. In Norway, *multekrem* — whipped cream and cloudberries — is a favourite combination, particularly enjoyed at Christmas time.

TRONDHEIM

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Pack your woolies and come to Trondheim, once the Viking capital of Norway and now a hotbed of gastronomy and contemporary arts. From Michelin-starred restaurants to a vast network of skiing trails and warming huts, all sorts of wintery wonder await in this gem just below the Arctic Circle.

Come for the winter and stay for the warmth, in the shape of a fjordside sauna, an award-winning cocktail at the Britannia Hotel or a stroll through the lively Christmas market. A visit to Trondheim will reward your curiosity and thrill your senses.

visittrondheim.no/en

Direct flights to Trondheim from London are operated by Norwegian.

IMAGE: GETTY

The Big Trip

The Himalayas

HOME TO THE WORLD'S TALLEST PEAK, THIS IS A MOUNTAIN RANGE THAT NONE OTHER CAN MATCH — AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A HARDCORE MOUNTAINEER TO GO. FROM EVEREST BASE CAMP TO BHUTAN'S TIGER'S NEST, HERE ARE SOME OF THE BEST ROUTES. WORDS: JOE BINDLOSS

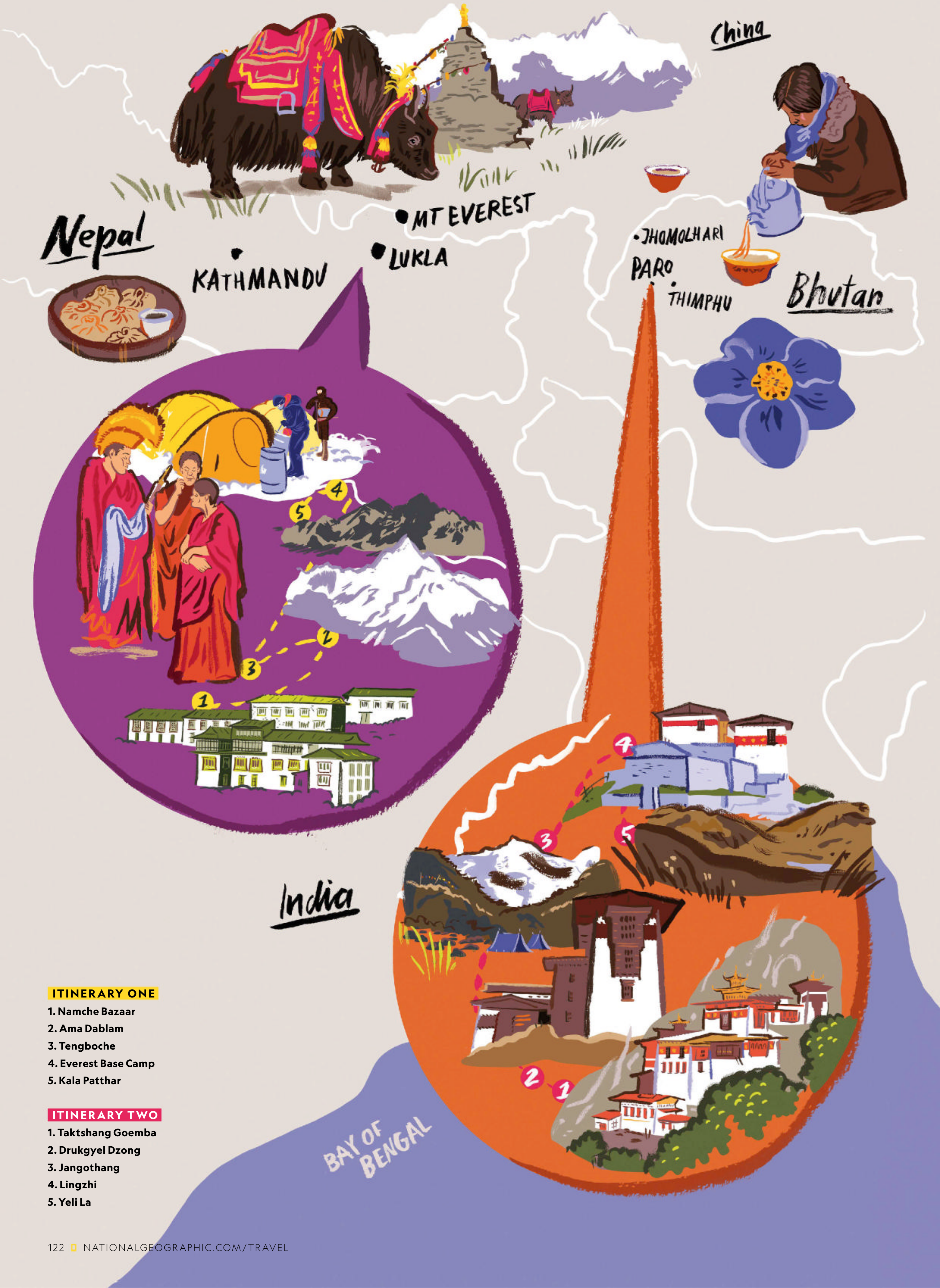
Draped across the very top of the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas are the stuff of trekking legend. Every hiker worth their boots has likely dreamed of tackling this range's trails, which carve out the craggy routes between remote villages and mountain monasteries, in the formidable shadows of the world's highest peaks.

In the high-altitude valleys of Nepal, Bhutan and India, trekkers face sights that many may believe are reserved for mountaineers: the aquamarine lakes in their valleys, the alpine meadows dusted with wildflowers and the snow-capped mountains themselves.

And in the rugged landscapes between the peaks live bands of indomitable people — nomadic yak herders, enlightenment-seeking monks, mountain-climbing Sherpas. You'll find culture in abundance here, too, whether you stay in local teahouses or trek off-grid. And there are ways for even beginners to experience all of this.

The reality is that with so many destinations to choose from, trekking in the Himalayas can be as challenging or as comfortable as travellers want it to be. On a camping expedition in Bhutan, supported by guides, cooks, tent-assemblers and even packhorses, trekkers are largely unburdened save for perhaps a camera or hiking poles. Meanwhile, at the opposite end, prize views are open to anyone looking for a real challenge and willing to do all the heavy lifting. Hardy trekkers can find the kind of solitude normally reserved for snow leopards in remote valleys, where the only sound comes from tinkling streams of meltwater and the soft breezes that drift down from the high mountains in whispers.

To help you make sense of the region, choose between two long-distance treks in Nepal or Bhutan, which are suitable for fit beginner or intermediate hikers, or try an easier introduction to the Himalayan foothills of India in search of rare birdlife.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ITINERARY ONE

1. Namche Bazaar
2. Ama Dablam
3. Tengboche
4. Everest Base Camp
5. Kala Patthar

ITINERARY TWO

1. Taktshang Goemba
2. Drukgyel Dzong
3. Jangothang
4. Lingzhi
5. Yeli La

Stupas line the Everest Base Camp trail around Ama Dablam mountain, Nepal
Previous pages: Kye Gompa, India

ITINERARY ONE: EVEREST BASE CAMP, NEPAL

Start & finish: Lukla • **Max elevation:** 5,645m • **Gain in elevation:** 2,785m • **Distance:** 81 miles • **Guides:** Required

There are 14 peaks higher than 8,000m in the world, and eight of them are found in Nepal — including Mount Everest (Sagarmatha), which, at 8,849m, is the loftiest of them all. The two-week trek to Everest Base Camp takes breathless walkers to heights above 5,000m, with thrilling views every step of the way.

En route, hikers meander between ancient villages and pass Buddhist monasteries and scattered *chortens* (stupas), with soaring viewpoints poised above an almost extraterrestrial landscape of rock and ice on a dizzying scale. And, surprisingly, these views come more easily than many might think: cosy teahouses offer comfortable rooms, hot meals and even cold beers on every stage of the trek.

Buddhist Sherpa farmers and livestock herders call this part of the Himalayas home, but the Base Camp trail is well trodden, so as well as mountain villages, you'll find internet cafes, European-style bakeries, and shops selling trekking poles, down jackets and fleeces. Few other treks offer such a sublime mix of traditional culture, drama and comfort.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. NAMCHE BAZAAR

It takes two days to hike from the tiny mountain airstrip at Lukla to Namche Bazaar. This thriving amphitheatre of stone lodges gazes towards the lofty peaks, with ancient shrines, Gore-Tex gear shops, yak steak restaurants and even an Irish bar, where trekkers toast to their success after tiring days on the trails. Pause here for short acclimatisation hikes to the fascinating Sherpa villages of Khumjung, Khunde and Thame, where you can get a taste of local life.

2. AMA DABLAM

Everest may be top dog, but 6,812m-high Ama Dablam is arguably the most perfect peak in the central Himalayas — an isolated sentinel almost mirroring the pyramid-topped Buddhist stupas that line the Base Camp trail. There are stupendous views of the snow-encrusted summit between Namche Bazaar and the Buddhist monastery at Tengboche.

3. TENGBOCHE

The Buddhist monastery at Tengboche holds a special place in the hearts of visitors to the Himalayas. The resident monks have welcomed everyone from Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the first to conquer Everest in 1953, to record-breaking Nepali climber Nirmal Purja. Millions of trekkers have also been drawn by its traditional architecture and vividly colourful murals. It's one of the loveliest stops in the Everest region, with epic views over a ridge of snowy peaks and comfy lodges crowning a grassy plateau.

4. EVEREST BASE CAMP

The base camp used for ascents of Mount Everest is perhaps the most legendary trekking destination of them all. Amid scattered boulders and tooth-like pinnacles of ice, you'll find mountaineers huddled around dome tents and satellite phones, acclimatising for the push to the summit. Grab a slice of hot apple pie from the world's highest bakery before trekking downhill to the teahouses at Gorak Shep.

5. KALA PATTHAR

The summit of Everest is hidden from view at Base Camp, behind the rocky shoulder of 7,861m-tall Nuptse. For incredible vistas of the world's highest peak, hike from Gorak Shep to the summit of Kala Patthar (5,645m) — a blackened crag with uninterrupted Everest views. It's a breathless two-hour ascent to reach the top, but from here, the black summit of Everest stands clear of its companion peaks, rising majestically above the Khumbu Glacier.

GETTING THERE: There are no direct flights to Nepal; the easiest connections are through Istanbul with Turkish Airlines or through Doha with Qatar Airways. Turkish Airlines has daily flights to Istanbul from numerous UK airports; Qatar Airways flies daily to Doha from London, Manchester and Edinburgh. Many airlines fly from Kathmandu to the starting point, Lukla, including Yeti Airlines. turkishairlines.com qatarairways.com yetiairlines.com

HOW TO DO IT: Intrepid has 15-day guided treks to Everest Base Camp in Nepal from £1,043 per person. Flights to Kathmandu not included. intrepidtravel.com

IMAGE: GETTY. ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTINE RÖESCH

ITINERARY TWO:
JHOMOLHARI, BHUTAN

Start / finish: Paro / Thimphu
Max elevation: 4,930m • **Gain in elevation:** 2,120m
Distance: 77 miles • **Guides:** Required

Starting close to Bhutan's only international airport and ending in the diminutive capital, Thimphu, the Jhomolhari trek is to Bhutan what the Everest Base Camp trek is to Nepal. Rising through wind-scoured valleys, this week-long camping trek takes its name from 7,326m Jhomolhari, the sacred mountain abode of one of Bhutan's five protector goddesses and the defining landmark on the route.

Many trekkers kick off with an acclimatising hike to the legendary *goemba* (monastery) of Taktshang, also known as Tiger's Nest, which is balanced precariously on a sheer cliff wall, before setting off for the alpine meadow of Jangothang. The latter is the focal point of the Jhomolhari trek, where the ice-encrusted face of the mountain rises like a beacon over the tooth-like ruins of an abandoned fortress.

The hike takes a few days, during which you'll sleep under a vast canopy of stars and all thoughts of the modern world will eventually fade away. Meals, drinks, tents, guides and packhorses to carry your gear will be provided by the agency that arranges your travel to Bhutan; all you really need to bring is the willpower to propel yourself forwards.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. TAKTSHANG GOEMBA

According to legend, Taktshang Goemba — aka the Tiger's Nest — was anchored to the side of a sheer cliff wall using the hair of angels. Perhaps Bhutan's most famous monastery, here pilgrims chant mantras, prayer flags dance in the Himalayan breeze and prayer halls are adorned with legions of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* (enlightened beings). The steep four-hour hike here from Paro is a perfect primer for the more ambitious climbs that await on the Jhomolhari trek.

2. DRUKGYEL DZONG

This ancient *dzong* (fortress) set high on a hill is en route to the starting point of the Jhomolhari trek, Sharna Zampa, and many trekkers still pause here to admire the view before lacing up their hiking boots for the main event. After a devastating fire in 1951, the ornate prayer halls and woodcarvings of the historic fortress are being restored using traditional Himalayan construction techniques that have been preserved through the centuries.

3. JANGOTHANG

Reached via a two-day trek from Sharna Zampa, the campground at Jangothang sits around 750m below the highest point on the trail, with Jhomolhari's summit rising at the end of the valley. Linger here for gentle acclimatisation hikes to higher viewpoints, turquoise lakes and the ruined fortress that once guarded traders moving between Bhutan and Tibet.

4. LINGZHI

The village of Lingzhi sprawls across a grassy valley speckled with yaks and wildflowers, with the face of Jhomolhari peering over its shoulder. This mountain outpost is dominated by a timeworn hilltop *dzong*, built to commemorate Bhutan's victory over Tibet in 1667. It's a soothing spot to rest or explore before the big push to the Yeli La.

5. YELI LA

Marked by a lonely cairn decked with prayer flags, and offering sweeping views over a rugged landscape, the highest point on the trek sits at 4,820m — it's barely a small hill compared to the surrounding peaks, but still a draining endeavour at high altitude. Keep your eyes peeled for Himalayan blue sheep and marmots while you make the long descent onwards into the Wang Chhu valley towards Thimphu and your end point.

GETTING THERE

Drukair and Bhutan Airlines fly to Bhutan's Paro International Airport from Delhi, Kolkata, Kathmandu, Bangkok and Singapore. Numerous airlines offer connections. bhutanairlines.bt drukair.com.bt
The Jhomolhari trek starts 10 miles north of Paro at Sharna Zampa — your tour agent will arrange transfers.

HOW TO DO IT

The Adventure People has 12-day treks along the Jhomolhari trek from £4,805 per person, starting and finishing in Paro. Packages include meals, tented accommodation, guides and hotels in Paro. Visas and flights to Paro extra. theadventurepeople.com

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

Rinpung Dzong in Paro, Bhutan, near the Jhomolhari trek's start
Above: Taktshang Goemba, nicknamed the Tiger's Nest

Q&A

Choki Dorji, owner of Blue Poppy Tours & Treks

WHAT MAKES BHUTAN SUCH A GOOD PLACE TO GO TREKKING?
Bhutan is a remote country and the mountains are even more remote — yak herders live much as they did centuries ago up there. The routes are very unspoiled and we don't have any guest houses along the trails, so it offers the chance to really immerse yourself in nature.

HOW IS TREKKING IN BHUTAN DIFFERENT TO THE EXPERIENCE IN OTHER HIMALAYAN COUNTRIES?
We don't see many trekkers on the trails here — sometimes you will be on your own for the journey. And you get a whole team to look after you — the standard of care is very high.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE TIME OF YEAR FOR HIKING IN BHUTAN?
My favourite time to trek is June, July and August, when you can see spring and summer flowers in bloom. However, it's also rainy season, so it may not be everyone's cup of tea. bluepoppybhutan.com

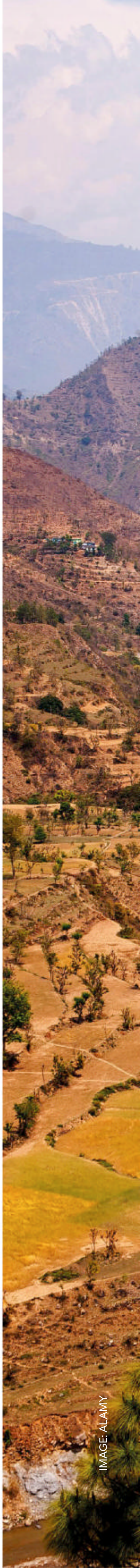

IMAGE: ALAMY

EYEWITNESS

EASY TREKKING IN INDIA

It's possible to experience the majesty of the Himalayas without breaking a sweat: Uttarakhand's Kumaon Hills offer routes for beginners, bringing rare birdlife, high-altitude views and remote villages into reach. Words: Lorna Parkes

It's impossible to tell how big the black eagle really is until it alights on the oak tree in front of me, making the branches droop and creak as it clings to its perch like an elephant on a tightrope. With a wingspan of around three feet, this giant bird of prey is far less graceful on its talons than it was a moment ago, when it was gliding in broad arcs over the rippling green valley. As I clasp a cup of chai on a terrace 1,800 metres up in the Kumaon Hills, I'm close enough to see its peppercorn-coloured wing tips.

Hiking in the Himalayas is often framed around breathless high passes and unforgiving mountain faces draped in prayer flags — but here in India's Himalayan foothills in Uttarakhand, surrounded by valleys of pine, oak and rhododendron forest, I'm experiencing a gentler side to Asia's famous mountain range. Travellers come to this little-known corner near the Nepalese border not to bag peaks but to bag avian sightings.

The next morning, I meet local guide Deepak Joshi, who notes that the effects of climate change are being felt in the region. "Usually the migratory birds come back in April," he says. "But this year they started coming back in February. It's a big difference." One of the founders of Village Ways walking company, Deepak joins me on the terrace of Khali Estate — a vine-draped former summer house built in the late 19th century by British commissioner Sir Henry Ramsay.

After a hearty breakfast of *aloo paratha* (potato-stuffed fried flatbread), I prepare to set off on a village-to-village hike in search of more birds at Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary. Fleece zipped high around his neck in the cool morning air, Deepak has his thumb poised over the button of a DSLR camera, with which he's recording Binsar's extraordinarily concentrated birdlife.

He tells me that despite the area only being 20 square miles, the reserve is renowned for its dense population of 200 bird species, including several types of eagles, woodpeckers and the giant Himalayan vulture. And, as climate change exerts pressure on India's more southerly Western Ghats, Deepak says Village Ways' specialist ornithology guides have seen more birdlife heading north, making the species diversity in these Himalayan hills richer than ever.

I leave Deepak and am soon out on the 30 miles of trails corkscrewing through the reserve, connecting Khali Estate with five village guesthouses for community stays. My next guide, Hem Joshi, and I are heading for one in the village of Risal, via his home in Dalar. Pine needles on the forest ridge crunch underfoot, and I wonder if the noise will scare off all the wildlife. But with no cars and few houses in the sanctuary due to a ban on development within its boundaries, nature is bold. It isn't long before we're immersed in the giant aviary of the forest.

Hem breaks off mid-sentence to point out a slaty-headed parakeet poking out of a nesting hole in a pine tree. Before I'm done marvelling at its bright-green crown, he swings round to where the path sweeps down the valley. "A crested serpent eagle," he whispers gleefully, pointing skywards to alert me to its baritone warble. "But where is it?" he asks himself, carefully scanning the hillside of sculpted farming terraces with his binoculars — to no avail.

Later Hem points out Dalar — a mottling of stone houses that emerges through the trees across the valley — before we descend, trees giving way to vine creepers straight out of *The Jungle Book* as the humidity rises. He explains that only six families live in his village now — the younger generation has migrated to the cities in search of work. With tourism in the region growing, some may be persuaded to stay.

Hem moves with the stealth of a ninja, attuned to the forest. At the bottom of the valley, passing a goatherder who clicks and whistles gently to his flock, we pause to follow a flame-bright rufous-bellied woodpecker up an oak tree with our binoculars, before hiking across a rocky riverbed that will become impassable during monsoon season.

"We have some birdwatchers who can spend a whole day just on this section of the trail," says Hem, as we watch warblers and flycatchers congregating around the limpid pools of water looking for insects.

By the time we reach Dalar for a chai break, we've spotted 16 bird species in just a couple of miles. At the entrance to the village, we're greeted by a small girl holding a baby goat in her arms like a doll. There are buffalos chewing the cud in front yards overflowing with turmeric-hued mustard flowers and pastel-pink peach blossoms.

It's here that I find the million-dollar-view on the steps of Hem's whitewashed, blue-shuttered mountain house: the jagged smile of the high Himalayas, still cloaked in snow. It's the same skyline that high-altitude trekkers elsewhere in the mountains will be admiring right now — I just haven't had to climb for days to find it.

HOW TO DO IT: Village Ways has 11-night walking holidays in Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary from £1,055 per person, including transfers and most meals, but excluding flights. Vistara has flights from Heathrow to Delhi from £890. villageways.com airvistara.com

Terraced fields hug the slopes of river valleys in the Kumaon Hills of Uttarakhand, India

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A masked dancer at Trashi Chhoe Dzong during Thimphu Tsechu in the Bhutanese capital

THE BEST FESTIVALS IN THE HIMALAYAS

Mani Rimdu, Tengboche, Nepal
The fabled monastery of Tengboche on the Everest Base Camp route overflows with Sherpa pilgrims in October or November. Celebrating the victory of Buddhism over the Bon religion of Tibet, festivities include masked dancers depicting protector deities and characters from Tibetan legends, and parades by members of the Yellow Hat Sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

Hemis Gompa, Hemis, India
At the end of the Markha Valley trail in northern India, Hemis Gompa marks the birth of the Indian guru Padmasambhava, in May, June or July. Look out for masks, murals and *thangkas* (cloth paintings) depicting the sage who transported Buddhism across the high Himalayas.

Paro Tshechu, Paro, Bhutan
The town of Paro's energetic Tshechu festival takes place in March or April each year, coinciding with the height of the busy spring trekking season. The sounds of horns and banging gongs fills the stone courtyard of Paro Dzong, while spirited performers dance in colourful, ornate masks depicting the fearsome protector deities, wild animals and the skeletal Lords of the Charnel Grounds.

Thimphu Tshechu, Thimphu, Bhutan
At the far end of the Jhomolhari trek, the Bhutanese capital erupts with colour in September or October. Thousands of pilgrims and monks dressed in red robes from across Bhutan gather to watch spectacular masked dances in the vast courtyard of Tashichho Dzong.

IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY

EVEREST

In numbers

1849

The year modern-day Everest was first measured by colonial surveyors, which determined 'Peak B' was 8,840m tall, using theodolites (surveying telescopes).

29,002FT

The official height of the mountain, renamed Peak XV, after surveyors recalculated its measurements in 1856. It works out to 8,839.8m.

1865

The year the British renamed Peak XV in honour of George Everest, surveyor general of India.

1954

The year Indian surveyors used triangulation to lock down the height of Everest at 8,847.73m.

1.2 INCHES

The amount the summit shifted south west following a massive earthquake that struck the Himalayas in 2015.

8,848.86M

The revised height agreed upon by Nepal and China in 2020, ending decades of arguments over whether Everest should be measured to its icy cap or its rocky peak.

2022

The year the Nepali government announced plans to move Everest Base Camp because of the increased risk from avalanches and flooding caused by climate change.

Yaks resting at a campsite at the foot of snow-encrusted Ama Dablam, nine miles south of Mount Everest in Nepal's Sagarmatha National Park

A practical guide to hiking the Himalayas

When should I go?
The peak hiking seasons in Nepal and Bhutan are February to March and October to November, with clear skies and moderate temperatures. In the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, March to April and September to October offer the best weather without excessive heat. In most areas, views vanish during the rainy monsoon season (June to September). Trekking in deep winter (December to February) can be a bitterly cold experience, best left to accustomed hikers.

What clothes should I bring?
Temperatures drop quickly as you gain altitude, but you'll work up a sweat while hiking, so bring layers that you can take off and put on again, as needed. Thermal underwear, lightweight trousers, fleece tops and a down jacket for cold nights are core pieces of kit.

What should I wear on my feet?
Some people trek in walking or trail-running shoes, but hiking boots will give your ankles more support. Use quick-drying socks and dry out your boots if they get wet to reduce the chance of blisters. Break in any new footwear before you hit the trails, too, and use hiking poles to reduce the impact on your knees.

Do I have to carry all my own gear?
Many trekkers do, but it's easy to hire porters or yaks and packhorses at trailheads to carry your bags. Porter-guides (who guide trekkers and also help carry bags) charge from US$20 (£15) per day, and usually speak some English. On an organised trek, you may be able to hike with just your camera and water bottle or a light day pack.

Do I need a sleeping bag?
Himalayan teahouses provide thin mattresses and blankets, but rooms are rarely heated, and a quality sleeping bag will help ensure a cosy night's sleep. A 'four season' rating is best for high-altitude routes.

Should I buy bottled water on the trails?
The Himalayas are strewn with empty plastic bottles, left behind by irresponsible trekkers. Instead, bring a water bottle and purification tablets, or a portable water filter, to purify water as you go from the rivers that snake between high passes.

Is altitude sickness a problem? And if so, how can I counteract the effects?
Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) is a risk on any route that climbs above 2,500m. To combat it, limit your rate of ascent, taking regular rest days to acclimatise. Diamox (Acetazolamide) tablets can also reduce mild symptoms such as headaches, but if you experience severe symptoms, including nausea, dizziness or confusion, descend immediately — AMS can be fatal.

Will I need to get a trekking permit to hike in the Himalayas?
To visit Bhutan, you'll need to arrange an organised tour through a licensed travel company; the overall price will include visa fees, obligatory daily tourist fees, and most of your costs, including for treks. In Nepal, you'll need to arrange a guide through a local trekking agency and pay for a Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal card (*taan.org.np*). There are fees to enter conservation areas, including Sagarmatha National Park on the Everest Base Camp trail, and permits are needed to trek through border regions such as Mustang and Dolpo. ▯

IMAGE: GETTY

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MALAYSIA

Adventure island

Occupying a verdant swath of northwest Borneo, Sarawak offers up some of Asia's most sublime caves and wildlife-rich nature trails.

Words: Adrian Philips. Photographs: Richard James Taylor

Sea stack rock formation at Bako National Park, Kuching
Left: Hiking in the Bako National Park rainforest, Kuching

With large swathes of rainforest waiting to be explored, Malaysia's beautiful island region of Sarawak is fast becoming a prime destination for travellers seeking adventure.

Here you'll find fairytale caves, crashing waterfalls, forests of towering tapang trees and limestone sea stacks in weird and wonderful shapes. Trek under the canopy and you may be lucky enough to spot orangutans, proboscis monkeys and even a rhinoceros hornbill bird, which takes pride of place on Sarawak's coat of arms.

Sarawak has more than 24 national parks and reserves open to the public, all protecting habitats including beaches and coastal mangroves, hilly inland regions and mountains along the Indonesian border.

Here are five adventurous ways to get a taste of the region's extraordinary flora, fauna and geology.

1. HIKE BAKO NATIONAL PARK

Bako National Park, on a finger of land poking into the sea north of Kuching, has an excellent network of hiking trails criss-crossing its nearly 11sq miles. These come in a whole range of lengths and difficulties to suit all travellers, from gentle meanders from the park visitor centre to more challenging treks of up to six miles that will fill a few hours. Base yourself in one of the forest lodges so you can hit the trails first thing to avoid the midday heat and see the best of the wildlife.

The park has seven separate ecosystems, including mixed dipterocarp forest, areas of mangrove and stretches of grassland. The vegetation can shift within a few hundred metres from tropical rainforest to varieties of flora that grow on stonier ground. Much of it comes supersized; you can pass between the folded trunks of vast durian trees and wind beneath umbrella-like palm leaves. All around is the undulating rattle of cicadas, and at times the sound of water falling into hidden pools.

Among the animals living in the forests is the endangered and endemic proboscis monkey. Its protruding round belly and large pendulous nose make this unique animal easy to identify within the dense rainforest foliage.

There are also long-tailed macaques and silver-leaf langurs, with their characterful tufted hairdos. Look for soil by the trailside that's been disturbed by bearded pigs, and perhaps a green pit viper curled around a branch. The particularly beady-eyed might spot a flying lemur resting among the trees.

Beyond the lush rainforest and the trails, Bako National Park's coastline is also truly inviting, with quiet bays and secluded beaches, craggy clifftops and some spectacular rock formations — including a famous natural sea stack that looks like a rearing cobra.

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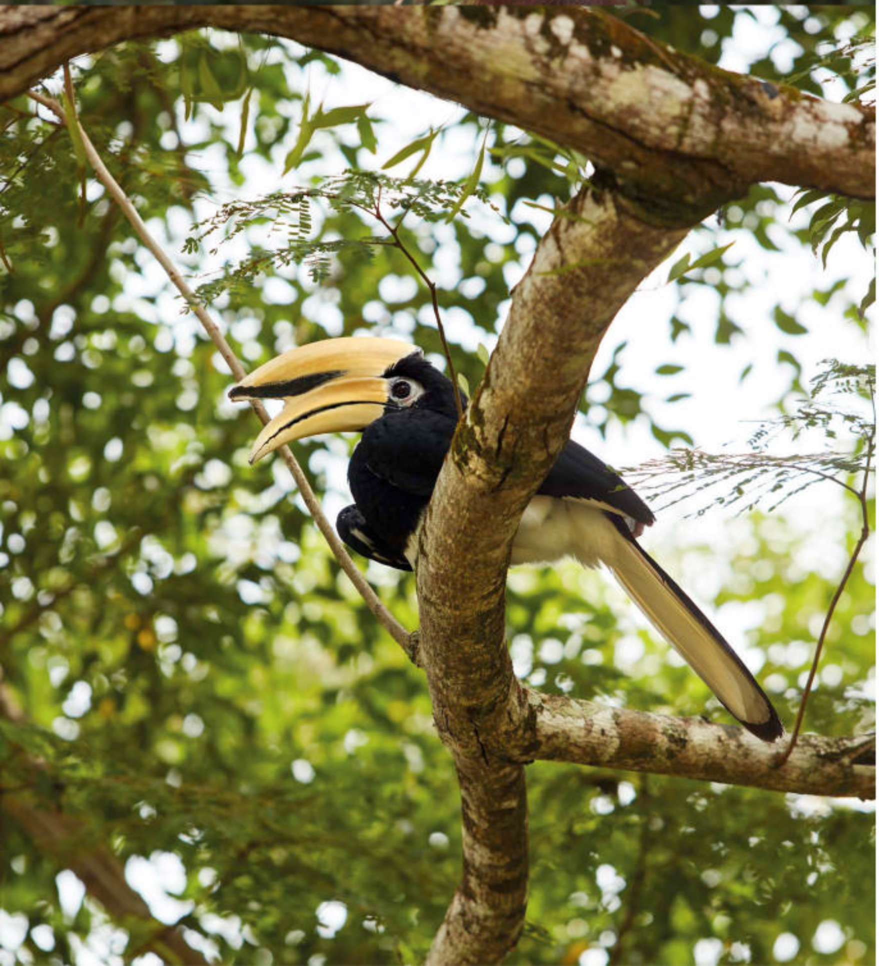

2. SCALE THE FAIRY CAVE

The former gold-mining region of Bau, an hour from Kuching, offers some excellent outdoor activities to get the heart pumping, from rock climbing to mountain biking through forests, past lakes and cabins that were once used by gold miners.

The standout highlights are its caves, including the Fairy Cave, dating back around 170 million years. It gapes from high up a cliff face, and explorers need to scale four flights of steps to reach the entrance. Once there, join the Twilight Trail, which winds for 1,125 feet through the vast cavern.

It's easy to believe there are fairies here; during the day, an opening in the roof of the cave casts a soft light, and the outcrops of karst limestone inside are covered with mosses and plants that give the place a grotto-like feel. Towards the rear stands a stalagmite that looks like a standing fairy-like figure; in the past, people would come here to pray before it. Various legends surround the form: according to locals, a young boy was cursed by the fairy for relieving himself in the cave... You've been warned.

3. DISCOVER PIASAU NATURE RESERVE

From unpromising beginnings, Piasau Nature Reserve has become a conservation success story. Lying on the northwest coast, 20 minutes from Miri — a city that mushroomed after the discovery of oil in 1910 — this was once a camp containing the living quarters of Shell employees. At its height, there were 202 houses here; it would not have been considered as a nature reserve. But in 2013, a poacher killed an endangered oriental pied hornbill that had bred for several years in a hollow tree at the camp. The outrage that ensued resulted in a decision to return the region to its natural rainforest state.

The accommodation blocks were dismantled and irrigation systems installed to help rehabilitate degraded forest areas. A 'tree adoption' programme was launched to encourage funding from individuals and businesses. Five zoned gardens are planted here — including a mixed species garden and a fruit tree garden — and you can now walk trails through them and the wider rainforest. This is a project still in its infancy, but already nature is on the march back to rude health, with walks accompanied by the calls of kingfishers and frogs, and the swish of branches as long-tailed macaques leap through the canopy.

Even better, the former mate of the deceased hornbill found a new mate, and the pair — nicknamed Jimmy and Juliet — can often be seen in the forest.

4. TREK NIAH NATIONAL PARK

Niah National Park, located in the north of Sarawak, is the site of one of Borneo's most important archaeological discoveries: a skull dating back at least 40,000 years. The cave where it was discovered is an epic place, with its roof soaring like a cathedral, bats roosting in dark corners and swiftlets screeching and wheeling overhead. Nearby, a second cave contains ancient wall paintings and several wooden boat-shaped coffins.

Journeying into the caves is a memorable experience in its own right. Start with a short boat ride across the Niah River before joining an atmospheric 1.8-mile trail through the rainforest, where vines snake around the buttressed trunks of binuang trees. From somewhere deep in the forest come the soft, deep calls of bulbul birds, a sound like someone blowing into a bottle. A copper-coloured stream bubbles alongside, and once in a while the gnarled surfaces of limestone cliffs emerge dramatically from the greenery before disappearing once more. It's a backdrop that could easily grace an Indiana Jones film.

5. VISIT SEMENGGOH WILDLIFE CENTRE

Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, just 30 minutes' drive south of Sarawak's capital, Kuching, was originally set up in the 1970s as a rehabilitation centre for orangutans that had been injured or rescued from illegal captivity. Since then, it has become a 1,600-acre reserve with a troop of around 30 orangutans and a thriving rainforest habitat.

The reserve contains several wooden platforms among the trees that rangers stock with food between March and September, when fruit is otherwise scarce. Twice daily, visitors can follow a trail to a viewing area in the hope of seeing some of the troop coming to feed. There are no guarantees, but some orangutans will usually descend from the canopy to the platform when there's food to eat. If you're lucky, you might be there when Annuar pays a visit; the troop's dominant male with distinctive face pads. It's certainly an encounter to remember.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Sarawak
More to Discover

There are regular flights to Kuching from Heathrow via Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. For more information, visit *sarawaktourism.com*

Crossing the Niah River to find The Great Cave at Niah Caves National Park, Miri
Clockwise from below: exploring the entrance to the Great Cave in Niah National Park, Miri; the oriental pied hornbill, a rare and endangered species of bird in Sarawak; orangutans at Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, Kuching

Theatre
Tina
THE TINA TURNER MUSICAL
PANTAGES
INDIANA JONES
and the DIAL OF DESTI
GET TICKETS N
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Hollywood Boulevard runs for over four miles through Los Angeles

CITY LIFE

LOS ANGELES

The US city has roots in Latin America — and is still shaped by its influence at every turn, from architecture to food trends

WORDS: ALICIA MILLER
PHOTOGRAPHS: TANVEER BADAL

You wouldn't know it from the sea of skyscrapers hemmed in by traffic-clogged freeways. Or from the flashy Hollywood studios, the multi-million-dollar celebrity homes or the Dior parading down Rodeo Drive. But a little over 200 years ago, Los Angeles was a wilderness, just sea and mountains and big sky. Back then, what's now considered the quintessential US city wasn't even in America, but in Mexico.

"In 1781, 44 settlers moved to this area from New Spain, further south," explains Edgar Garcia, as we wander through El Pueblo on a sunny morning. A couple of blocks bookended by Downtown's office buildings and grand Union Station, sandwiched between Chinatown and Little Tokyo, this small district is the oldest part of LA. It's where the global metropolis was born. Now protected, the pretty, low-rise buildings and streets of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument (the area's full name) form the heart of the city's Mexican-heritage community. "When the settlers arrived, this was the frontier of the frontier," continues Edgar, the monument's assistant manager. "They had to resettle several times before they built the church, around 1820."

The church, along with several other early-19th-century buildings, is still here. It's Sunday morning and families are pouring towards its whitewashed exterior, distinctly Spanish in its simple curves and tiled roof. Nearby, in a square containing a bandstand and fringed with thick-trunked trees, artisans sell sweets dusted in the Mexican lime-chilli seasoning Tajín. A plaque lists the names of the

44 founding *pobladores*, or settlers — mostly impoverished people driven to find a new life at the cutting edge of the Spanish empire.

El Pueblo de Los Angeles was just one of several settlements founded in the 18th century along the coast of California. In 1821, when Mexico declared independence from Spain, Alta California — as this region was then known — and its clutch of villages and religious missions also left the empire. The Mexican-American war (1846–1848) led to Alta California's annexation and the area became a US free state. As a new, predominantly English-speaking LA Downtown grew up alongside it, El Pueblo fell into disrepair and disrepute.

"In a way, we're lucky the area was forgotten," says Edgar as we stroll past historic Pico House, once a grand hotel. "We still have our 19th-century buildings, which would have been knocked down otherwise." He adds that, over time, nostalgia for LA's Spanish past grew, and in the 1920s a wealthy Oakland woman, Christine Sterling, helped restore El Pueblo to a romantic, film-set-perfect version of Mexico. Mexican families were encouraged to open tourist-facing businesses here, some of which endure today.

I swing open the door to LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, in the area's western corner, for a deeper dive. A community hub, as well as museum and cookery school, it provides an immersive look at Hispanic culture in LA and beyond. Curator Esperanza Sanchez walks me through the exhibits, charting the many difficult chapters of LA's growth out of El Pueblo. There are many: the displacement and maltreatment of the Indigenous Tongva community; land grants that disenfranchised Mexican-descent families; and 1930s immigration raids that saw mass deportation to open up jobs for 'real' (ie, white) Americans. "The California constitution was originally in both Spanish and English," Esperanza tells me as we pass colourful, large-scale paintings by artist Margaret García and a display board on Ritchie Valens, the musician behind the 1958 hit La Bamba. Clearly, the question isn't where Latin culture has touched this city, but rather where it hasn't.

Back outside, the square has filled. Musicians are on the bandstand and grey-haired locals salsa dance to their songs. A nearby church service has ended, releasing crowds into the street, and they drift towards El Pueblo's main drag, Olvera Street. I join the bodies snaking along the cobblestone row, passing under a historic mural by Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, perusing stalls selling *lucha libre* wrestling masks and ponchos woven with the logo of the LA Dodgers baseball team. I follow a few people into Ávila Adobe house — the city's oldest standing residence, built in 1818 — and pause in its dusty, tree-lined courtyard, a knobbly ancient grapevine scrambling up a pergola beside me. Is this really still LA? After a fleeting moment of stillness, drawn by the scent of sizzling peppers and warm tortillas, I follow the parade towards Sunday lunch.

TAKING A BITE

Every community has its political meeting place — somewhere for handshakes over good food, see-and-be-seen socialising and backroom deals. I'm told by Edgar that in El Pueblo, this place is El Paseo Inn. Founded in the 1930s, it's occupied its current Olvera Street location since 1953 and has been run by Don Carmacho's family since the 1980s. The great and the good of LA's Hispanic community have dined under its adobe-style wood ceilings — as have a number of other high-profile guests. "George H W Bush sat at that table right there," Don tells me, pointing across the private dining room. "It was around 5pm one evening in the 1990s and my dad called me up at home, saying I had to get down to the restaurant quick because the president's in town and fancies some chips and salsa."

"Los Angeles is 72 suburbs in search of a city."
Poet and satirist Dorothy Parker

INSIDER TIPS

You can try wrangling with LA's limited train network, but getting around by taxi is far more efficient. Uber is obviously bountiful, but in some neighbourhoods you can also use the cheap ride-sharing app Metro Micro, run by the city's public transport operator. uber.com micro.metro.net

Visit in June for the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival. Features, shorts, animation and music are all in the mix over six days. laliff.org

Don't try to pack too many long journeys into one day — Los Angeles is actually a vast collection of smaller 'cities' clustered together, and in rush hour, traffic can really slow you down. Choose a couple of areas instead and see them in depth.

Some of the best people-watching in LA is down by the sands. Santa Monica Beach and Venice Beach are among the most famous, but Manhattan Beach is handily located right by the airport, making it a great spot for a dip before your flight home.

Market stalls selling Latin products along Olvera Street in El Pueblo
Below, from left: One of the nostalgic Mexican dishes on offer at El Paseo Inn; a mural on El Pueblo's central square

The Blessing OF The

We grab our own table in the main dining area, festooned in lights and wooden wagon wheels. By the front door, a chef is making tortillas by hand, and on tables all around multi-gen families and groups of friends scoop up bowlfuls of guacamole. “People have a tradition to visit every Sunday,” Don tells me. “They go to church with their families, then they come here. Family is so important to our culture and we want to honour that — which means providing the meal they’ve come to expect.” Don is a dealer in nostalgia as much as nourishment, supplying the familiar dishes generations of locals have grown up with.

As my *carne asada* tacos arrive, I ask Don how he squares such tradition with the need to make changes, and he shrugs. “We try to make things a bit healthier sometimes, or we might use Mexican *crema* [similar to sour cream] rather than more cheese. We’re not the food you find in Mexico, nor are we Tex Mex. There’s *menudo* beef tripe stew on the menu, but also fajitas.” The aim is to find a happy place where the likes of Don’s parents and tourists who rarely eat Mexican can all find something they like.

Olvera Street may be the epicentre of Mexican food in LA, but venture further afield and you’ll find Latin culinary influences everywhere. On Hollywood Boulevard, hot-dog vendors top their grills with jalapeños. In new Downtown hotel Conrad Los Angeles, the star breakfast is tortilla with egg white and caviar. In upmarket West Hollywood, restaurant Gracias Madre cooks vegan Mexican classics with cashew cheese and soy chorizo.

South of Hollywood Boulevard, chef Wes Avila serves his own high-end interpretation of coastal Tulum cuisine in his restaurant, Ka’teen. With outdoor seating and tropical greenery, it has a laid-back Yucatán atmosphere but is just a stone’s throw from the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

“Mexican food is getting trendier,” he says, explaining how after making his name in taco trucks, a bricks-and-mortar restaurant felt like the natural next step. “Tacos, for example, have been elevated as chefs use better meat cuts and more seasonal produce.” Wes points out that pricing is a battle, as diners unfairly expect Hispanic food — Mexican, in particular — to be cheap. “People complain if you charge $6 for a taco. But it’s perception. If you disassemble that taco and put those ingredients on a plate,” Wes says, “suddenly you could charge triple the price.” Diners are, however, happy to shell out for seafood, which is why he says dishes like ceviche have become popular in higher-end Mexican restaurants.

I’d happily pay top dollar for Wes’s *kampachi crudo* with mustard seed vinaigrette, but my favourite is his *esquites* (grilled corn), flavoured with coconut and parmesan. With its globe-trotting flavours, Ka’teen is the other side of the spectrum to Don’s more traditional dishes.

“I wouldn’t call this cuisine Mexican really,” Wes tells me after I’ve finished eating. “The best description that someone has coined is ‘Alta Californian’ or ‘north of the border’ cuisine. There’s a Mexican lens on it but, this being the LA melting pot, there are influences from Japan and Lebanon, France and the Philippines, too.”

My mind returns to El Pueblo’s bandstand square. On the plaque listing the 44 founding settlers from 1781, the names weren’t just Spanish, nor were their backgrounds — nearly half were Indigenous and Black. Edgar had explained that the neighbourhood has always been a place of different peoples and cultures, from Mexican to Chinese, many coming to seek a better life. So yes, on the surface, El Pueblo — a charming time warp in an endless sea of steel and glass — doesn’t seem much like the rest of Los Angeles. But on reflection, it could just be the most American place I’ve ever been.

Q&A with Andi Xoch, owner of the Latinx With Plants nursery, in Boyle Heights

WHAT CONNECTS HISPANIC IDENTITY AND PLANTS?
Plants have always tied into my culture and my identity as a brown/Mexican *mujer.* My grandmothers and their ancestors have used certain plants for generations and I hope to pass the learning on to others. For example, *epazote* [a herb] is used for cooking but also for digestion issues, and mint is used in recipes as well, but people also use it for bad breath and balancing hormones.

WHY SHOULD PEOPLE VISIT BOYLE HEIGHTS?
Boyle Heights is more than a culture hub, it’s a community. When you walk down streets like Cesar Chavez [Avenue] or Whittier [Boulevard], you see murals on the walls, and little mom-and-pop restaurants with their own interpretation of recipes. Boyle Heights has a special charm. It feels like you’re in Latin America.

AND WHERE SHOULD THEY GO?
La Chispa de Oro, an amazing, authentic Mexican restaurant, and El Mercadito, for a real Latin marketplace experience. Elsewhere, Eastside Luv is a community-minded bar that’s been here for a long time.

Clockwise from top: Community hub LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, in El Pueblo; chef Wes Avila in his restaurant, Ka’teen; a mural in Boyle Heights

DOS EQUI

INFORMATION

TOP 8

Stops in Latin LA

AMÉRICA TROPICAL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

BEST FOR: CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Perched high above the cobbles, halfway along Olvera Street in El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument, this political mural depicting a crucified figure was painted by socialist realist Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1932. A commentary on imperialism in the Americas, it was deemed too controversial and whitewashed just a few years after its creation. It has since been restored and can be seen on a visit to this museum, which also contextualises Siqueiros's influences in the Chicano Movement that advocated for civil rights. theamericatropical.org

CARNITAS EL MOMO

BEST FOR: TACOS

Chef Wes Avila raves about the traditional-style pork *carnitas* (pulled pork tacos) at this no-frills restaurant in east Los Angeles, and so does social media. Pair it with a visit to 'taco row' on Olympic Boulevard in Boyle Heights, where a clutch of taco trucks turn out some of the city's best casual Mexican eats. carnitas-el-momo.square.site

LA PLAZA DE CULTURA Y ARTES

BEST FOR: HISTORY & DANCING

This superb community centre and museum next to El Pueblo's church provides a wealth of information on the Latin community in Los Angeles and further afield. Follow the history of the city's explosive growth and learn how it impacted local communities, including the Tongva Indigenous people, who predated Spanish settlement. On Sunday afternoons, make for the El Pueblo bandstand outside to join the music and dancing. lapca.org

MUSEUM OF LATIN AMERICAN ART (MOLAA)

BEST FOR: LATIN ART

A 45-minute drive south of El Pueblo in Long Beach, the only museum in the US dedicated to Hispanic art has over 1,300 permanent pieces and a sculpture garden. There are changing exhibitions, too, with recent names including Colombian artist Fernando Botero and LA-based multimedia creative Yolanda González. If Long Beach is too far, try the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on central Wilshire Boulevard, for contemporary Latin American art. molaa.org lacma.org

Clockwise from top left: Manhattan Beach is convenient for the airport; hot dogs with jalapeños on Hollywood Boulevard; Union Station is partly built in Spanish Mission style; a margarita at El Paseo Inn

Left: Our Lady Queen of Angels church in El Pueblo was completed in 1822

GRACIAS MADRE WEST HOLLYWOOD

BEST FOR: UPSCALE DINING

Get a sense of the full spectrum of Hispanic culinary influence in one of LA's upmarket neighbourhoods, West Hollywood. At this vegan eatery, the gooey *queso fundido* is made from house-made cashew cheese, the empanadas from soy chorizo and the tacos *del mar* from plant-based 'fish'. It's a see-and-be-seen spot at lunch, too, with high-flying locals meeting up to chat Hollywood business over the seriously delicious margaritas. graciasmadre.com

CLUB TEMPO

BEST FOR: A UNIQUE NIGHT

Guaranteeing an evening out that you could only ever have in LA, this nightclub on Santa Monica Boulevard is a celebration of queer Latino cowboy culture. Dust off your hat and boots and come along to one of the popular drag nights, where you can dance to Latin pop until the wee hours. It's been open since the 1990s and is still going strong. clubtempocowboys.com

POP UP HOME

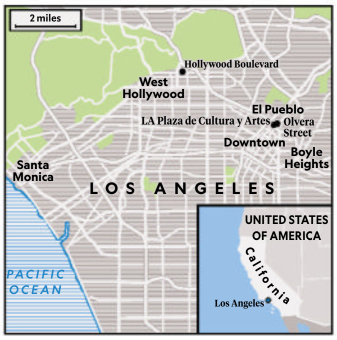
BEST FOR: DESIGN INSPIRATION

This West Hollywood interiors showroom, owned by Latina Tricia Benitez Beanum, could have come straight from the pages of a design magazine. Peruse the rattan chairs, ceramic planters and Bohéme 'Havana' scent candles, and mentally design your dream LA mansion. Tricia is also the founder of UNREPD, a gallery for artists from underrepresented backgrounds that hosts pop-up exhibitions throughout the city. popuphome.com unrepd.com

LA CASITA MEXICANA

BEST FOR: HOMESPUN COOKING

Another Wes Avila favourite, this nostalgic restaurant in Bell might be a bit of a schlep from the city centre, but it's well worth the journey. Homely weekly specials rotate through the likes of enchiladas, *chiles rellenos* (stuffed peppers) and tacos. Jalisco-born chefs Jamie Martin del Campo and Ramiro Arvizu have a bit of a fan following for their giant stuffed-pepper dish *chile en nogada*. casitamex.com



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly direct from Heathrow to Los Angeles multiple times a week, while Norse Atlantic flies from Gatwick. ba.com virginatlantic.com flynorse.com US carriers such as American Airlines, Delta and United also fly direct. aa.com delta.com united.com

Average flight time: 11h.

While some areas of Los Angeles are walkable — for example, West Hollywood — the majority of the city isn't, and the often vast distances between neighbourhoods means a hire car or taxi is advisable.

WHEN TO GO

Los Angeles' spring and autumn are mild and sunny with highs in the low to mid 20Cs. Summer days can get as hot as the high 30Cs, but nights can still be cool. Winters see milder weather and rain, but it's rarely very cold (daily highs tend to still be in the high teens).

WHERE TO STAY

Mama Shelter Los Angeles, near Hollywood Boulevard. Doubles from $180 (£140), room only. mamashelter.com

Conrad Los Angeles, Downtown. Doubles from $422 (£329), room only. hilton.com

MORE INFO

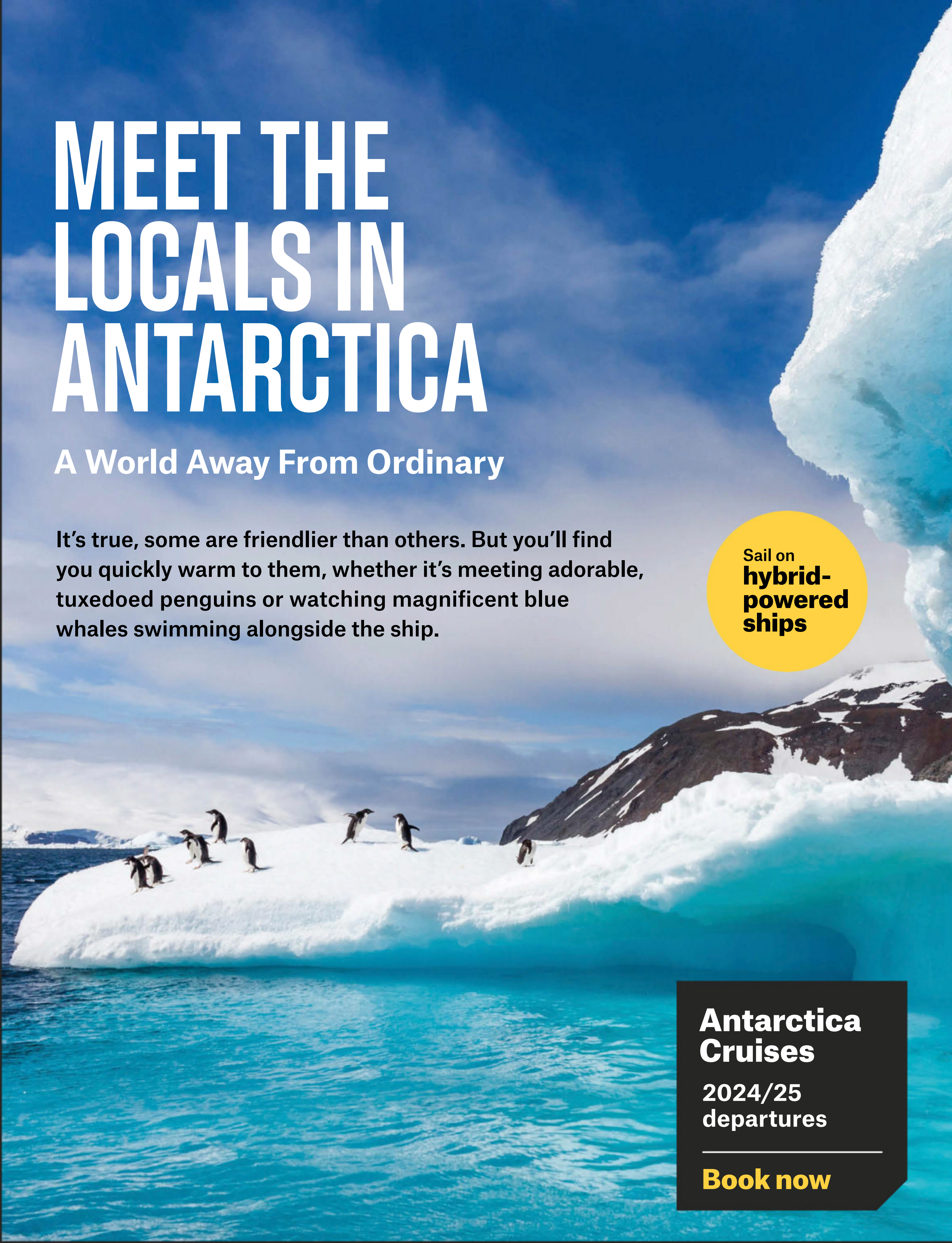
elpueblo.lacity.org

discoverlosangeles.com

HOW TO DO IT

Thomas Cook has seven nights at Conrad Los Angeles — a five-minute taxi ride from El Pueblo de Los Angeles — including UK flights, from £1,375 per person. thomascook.com

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



MEET THE LOCALS IN ANTARCTICA

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Silence please!

CITY LIFE

MILAN

There's always something fresh to discover in the northern Italian city, from a new hotel in a converted seminary to a cultural hub with contemporary art and a rooftop restaurant

WORDS: JULIA BUCKLEY
PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

It's too modern. It's too fashion-focused. It's fast-paced, devoid of la dolce vita, it doesn't feel *Italian*. Milan has had the same old criticisms levelled at it for decades, and for decades Italy's business capital has shrugged them off. Because anyone who really knows the city knows it's not like that at all. The difference between Milan and the rest of the country is that where most Italian cities put their heritage on blousy display, Milan stands back, willing you to discover hers gradually.

Heading out from the Piazza del Duomo, home to the marble-drenched cathedral, you can rattle around on the city's vintage trams and wander through the village-like districts spiralling out from the centre; each has its own identity, from artistic Brera to cool Ticinese. Peer through every open gateway and you might see a palazzo, a hidden garden, a 1930s villa — or a piazza-sized Renaissance cloister that just opened to the public after centuries of silence (the Portrait Milano).

That's the other thing about Milan: it's ever changing. This mercurial city has seen many lives — from Roman Mediolanum (traces of whose walls sit in the archaeological museum) to a city state so powerful that ruler Ludovico Sforza cajoled Leonardo da Vinci to migrate here as his engineer, leaving the world's most famous mural, The Last Supper, in his wake. Milan also played a pivotal role in the unification of Italy, created unimaginable wealth during the Industrial Revolution, and was subjected to heavy bombing during the Second World War. The latter left blank page after blank page for the designers of the 1950s to hone their creativity, streamlining a 'Made in Italy' style that entranced the world.

And it keeps reinventing itself. Global powerhouses from Pirelli to Prada have donated world-class galleries, arranging them around the bones of Milan's industrial past — a converted gin distillery here, a train factory there. Well-to-do locals honour their dead by donating to galleries or opening their own — the Fondazione Luigi Rovati, opened in 2022, is arguably Italy's finest Etruscan museum. This is a place of constant refinement, and not just in the ever-changing fashion collections — work on the Duomo, Italy's largest church, began in 1386 and ended only in 1965.

To be in Milan is to join this eternal quest for perfection, to never rest on your laurels, as many other Italian cities do, but to stretch out a hand to the future. Leonardo wanted to be part of that. You will, too.

SEE & DO

DUOMO: The grand, gothic Duomo is best seen from on high. Take the lift or climb 256 steps to the *terrazze* — meandering rooftop terraces where you can see the intricately carved flying buttresses, pinnacles and statues up close, as well as clocking blockbuster views of Milan's modern skyline. Excavations of the fourth-century baptistery lie underground, while the adjacent Museo del Duomo is filled with original versions of many of the statues spotted on the terraces. Each is so intricately carved it's as if they were always going to be seen at ground level, not several hundred feet up. duomomilano.it

QUADRILATERO D'ORO: In the 1950s, Milan's status as Italy's fashion capital was made here — the Golden Quadrangle of shopping streets, bordered by Via Sant'Andrea, Via Senato, Via Manzoni and, the most famous of all, Via Monte Napoleone. Whether you're actually wanting to make a purchase or just window shopping, it's a good chance to people-watch and enjoy the famously inventive window displays — Larusmiani and Bottega Veneta are always outstanding.

PINACOTECA DI BRERA: Cobbled Brera has long been Milan's arts district, and the Pinacoteca di Brera is one of Italy's finest galleries. Its collection includes an exceptional range of Renaissance works, from Mantegna to Raphael, and continues with Caravaggio all the way to Hayez. The building itself is a work of art — a 17th-century palace built as a Jesuit college. pinacotecabrera.org

THE LAST SUPPER AND LEONARDO DA VINCI'S VINEYARD: Leonardo's The Last Supper, which is in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, barely needs an introduction. Book ahead to see the mural that changed the course of art history, portraying the moment Jesus predicted his betrayal. Across the street is what remains of the vineyard that Ludovico Sforza gifted Leonardo as thanks for his works. Visits wind through the 15th-century Casa degli Atellani palazzo and finish at the small vineyard — planted with the Malvasia grape variety that Leonardo grew there. cenacolovinciano.org vignadileonardo.com

CASTELLO SFORZESCO: The Sforza family's vast 15th-century castle is now a museum, home to medieval Lombard carvings, Leonardo's forest painting in the Sala delle Asse (room of the tower), and Michelangelo's last sculpture, the emotionally charged Rondanini Pietà. To the north west, it opens onto Parco Sempione, the city's green lung. milanocastello.it

FONDAZIONE LUIGI ROVATI: Milan's newest museum combines Etruscan and contemporary art — you might see a Picasso vase next to a 2,500-year-old one, for example — in a design-centric hub of culture and gastronomy. Exhibitions change regularly. The underground Etruscan section, mirroring ancient tombs, is superb. Andrea Aprea is at the helm of the exceptional one-Michelin-star rooftop restaurant of the same name and there's a bistro in the garden. fondazioneluigirovati.org

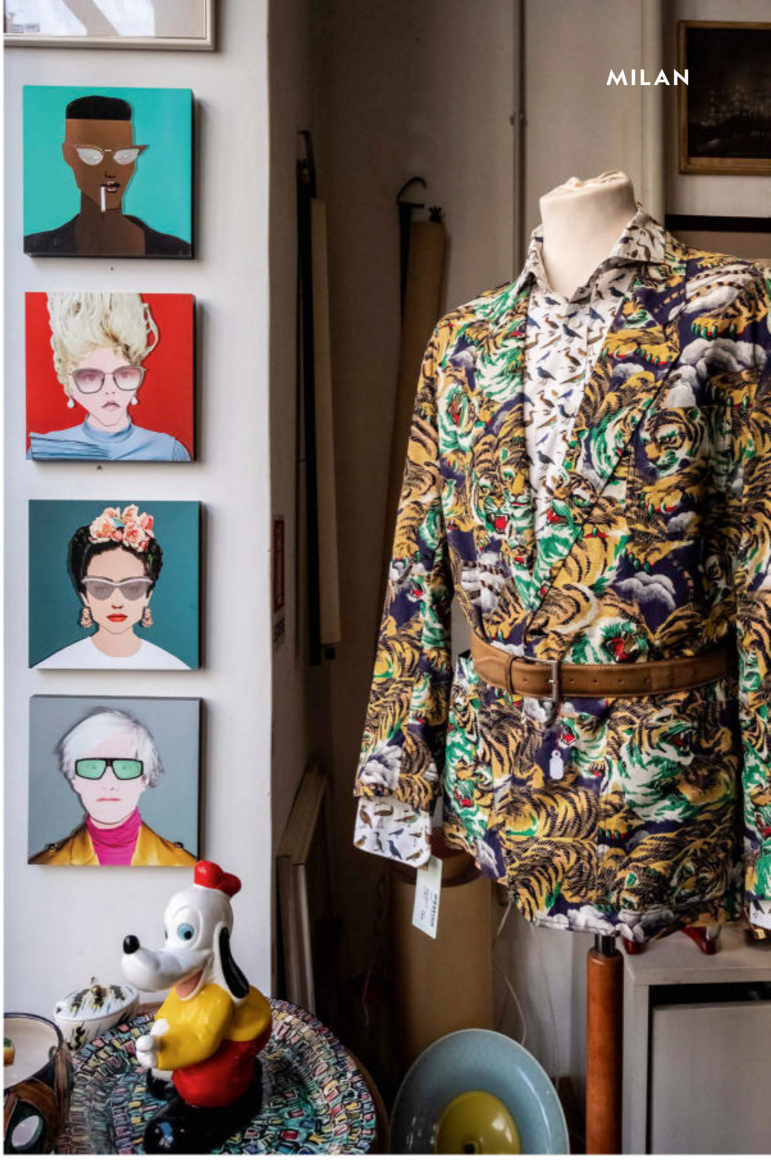
FONDAZIONE PRADA: Miuccia Prada commissioned starchitect Rem Koolhaas to transform an old gin distillery south of the centre into a repository of contemporary art. A new tower block houses the permanent collection, including works by Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, while temporary exhibitions lie in the distillery, next to the Wes Anderson-designed cafe. fondazioneprada.org

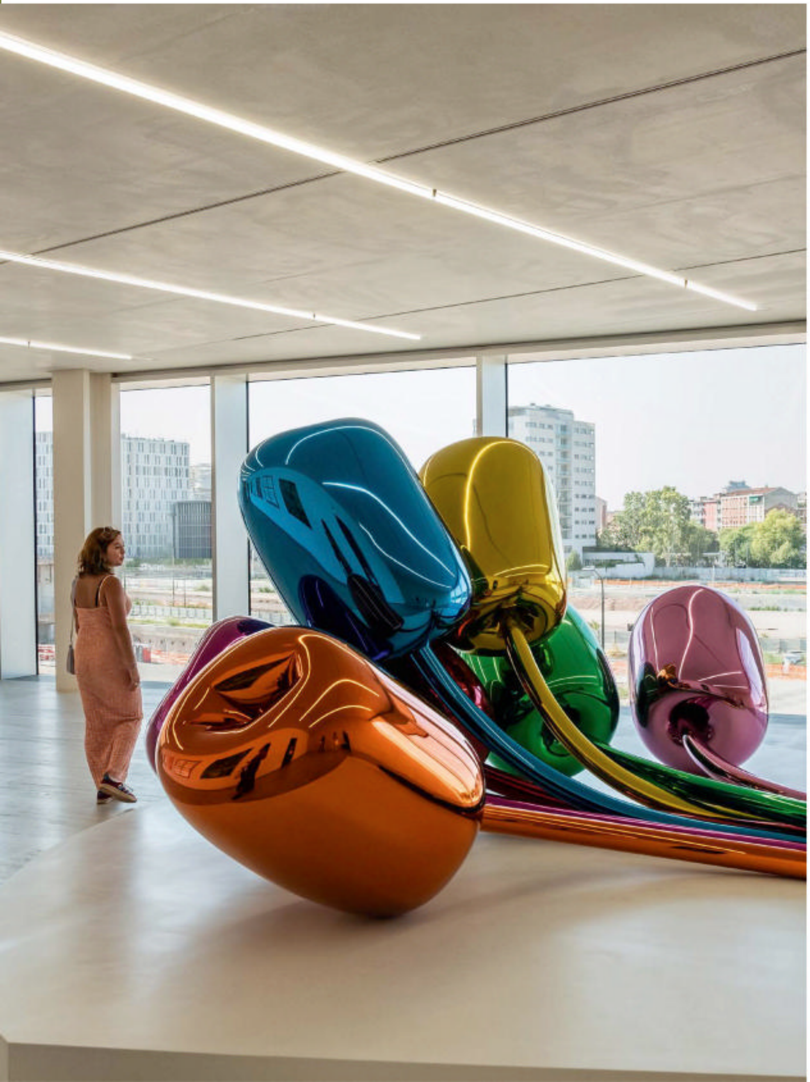
BUY

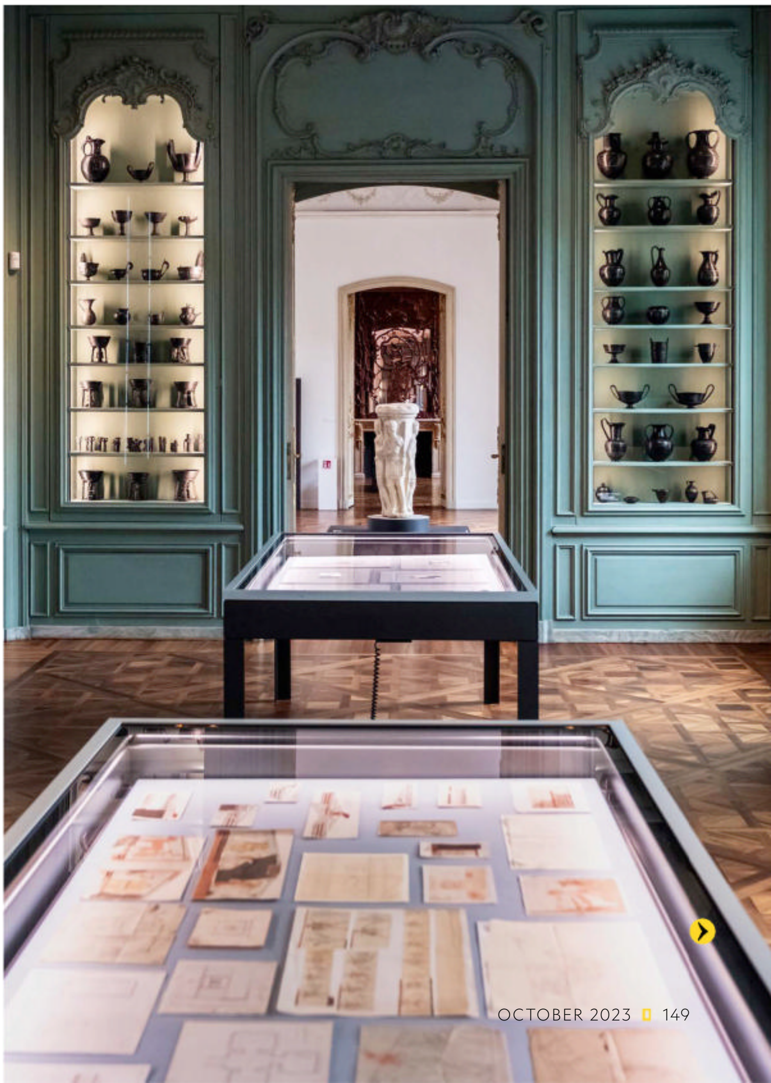
10 CORSO COMO: Fashion editor Carla Sozzani's concept shop stuffs impossibly cool clothes, design tomes, ceramics and even pet bowls into a plant-fringed, multi-level townhouse. If you're not buying, enjoy the photography gallery upstairs or the indoor-outdoor restaurant. 10corsocomo.com

IL MENEGHELLO: The late artist Osvaldo Menegazzi started reproducing medieval tarot cards and inventing his own decks in the 1970s. This shop, now run by his art historian niece, Cristina, sells artisan-made cards and reproductions of historic decks from the 1500s onwards. ilmeneghello.it

CAVALLI E NASTRI: Fashion through a vintage lens is the order of the day at this boutique. Today there are three branches: twin shops for men and women in the southern Ticinese district stock everything from 1920s slips to Jean Paul Gaultier leather jeans, while the showier Brera branch starts in the 1950s, selling the likes of Chanel jackets and Louis Vuitton bags. cavallienastri.com







Clockwise from right: Cavalli e Nastri's men's shop, Ticinese; the upper level of Fondazione Luigi Rovati; Jeff Koons's artwork in the Fondazione Prada; the 19th-century Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping arcade; view of the courtyard at 10 Corso Como
Previous pages: The collection at Pinacoteca di Brera

CAMPARI
L'APERITIVO
BITTER
CAMPARI

EAT

£ **SALSAMENTERIA DI PARMA:** With two branches in the city centre, this trattoria pays homage to Parma, a capital of Italian cuisine. Dishes such as pumpkin-stuffed tortelli and lasagne are served within minutes — with lashings of parmesan. Swill it down with a bowl (yes) of wine. salsamenteriadiparma.com

££ **CAFFÈ BISTROT:** Casual by name, gourmet by nature. The heart of the Fondazione Luigi Rovati is this restaurant by Andrea Aprea, which offers an affordable riff on his Michelin-starred joint upstairs. Sit in the garden under the magnolia tree to try dishes like pea soup with seared cuttlefish and quail egg, or risotto with courgette, provolone and sweet red prawns. andreaaprea.com

£££ **RISTORANTE BERTON:** Michelin-starred food gets playful at this Porta Nuova restaurant. Chef Andrea Berton's signature nine-course tasting menu, Non solo Brodo (not the usual broth), takes cooking's unsung hero centre stage, with concentrated broths to sip, drink or swirl over every dish. The cod — smoked over thyme leaves at the table — is incredible. ristoranteberton.com

AFTER HOURS

CAMPARINO IN GALLERIA: Taking pride of place in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan's 19th-century, glass-domed shopping mall, Camparino is beloved by the Milanese. A campari seltz (Campari and soda) with a side of people-watching in the Galleria, or outside overlooking the Duomo, is the classic Milanese aperitivo. camparino.com

CAFFÈ GIARDINO: Drink in the design scene at this laidback bar in the garden of the Triennale — Milan's rationalist-era design museum. There's seating by architects Gaetano Pesci and Ettore Sottsass, while a fountain by artist Giorgio de Chirico, who influenced the surrealist movement, overlooks Parco Sempione. triennale.org

THE BOTANICAL CLUB: This gin bar is a cut above the nearby canal-side haunts of the Navigli district, which often get rowdy. There are 70-odd labels racked up behind the plant-wreathed bar, and a regular cocktail list. This is the second branch, on fashionable Via Tortona, and has plenty of outdoor seating; the first, on Via Pastrengo, has its own gin distillery. botanicalclub.com

Back in Leonardo's day, Milan was crisscrossed with canals — in fact, he sketched designs to improve them. When trains and cars became popular, most canals were asphalted over, but they're still there below the city

Clockwise from top left: Camparino in Galleria; The Botanical Club gin bar; Campari spritzes at Camparino in Galleria; soaking up the view of the Duomo at Camparino in Galleria; spaghetto agli scampi (spaghetti, bisque and tartare of scampi, with basil crust) and the Stranger Mule cocktail, both at The Botanical Club

ROSERIO
P.za CASTELLI
1719

A tram rattles through Piazza Cordusio in the city centre

SLEEP

£ **NHOW MILANO:** What was once a hulking factory in the Via Tortona design district has been jazzed up in bright colours across its open-plan, industrial-style rooms. Look out for the rotating art installations by the lifts on each floor, while rooftop pool bar Vertigo pulls in dressed-up locals. nhow-hotels.com

££ **ANTICA LOCANDA DEI MERCANTI:** A former 18th-century inn once used by visiting merchants has been turned into this gorgeous 14-room hotel near the Duomo. The sunny top-floor, glass-walled rooms have terraces, while hefty bedside trunks and woollen rugs on the lower floors hint at the building's past. locanda.it

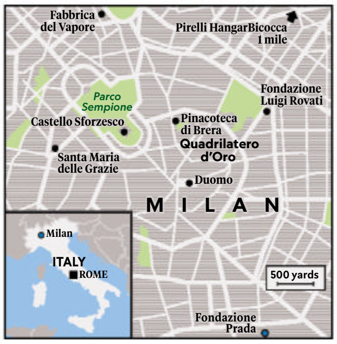
£££ **PORTRAIT MILANO:** Built as a seminary in the 16th century, this place has lived under many guises before its latest reincarnation as a luxury hotel. After stints as a military hospital and car park, the grand cloister, which straddles an entire city block, is home to two restaurants and shops — all of which are open to the public. Rooms are as jaw-dropping as the prices, with mid-century-style furniture and brushed brass tables. lungarnocollection.com

LIKE A LOCAL

INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE: Milan has converted some fascinating industrial spaces. These include the immense Pirelli HangarBicocca, a former factory that now has contemporary art on rotation, and the Fabbrica del Vapore, a locomotive workshop turned cultural centre, with a peaceful bar and huge exhibition room. pirellihangarbicocca.org fabbricadelvapore.org

STREET TRAMS: Milan is known for its characterful trams, with a mix of vehicles from different eras crisscrossing the centre. Hitch a ride on an ATM Class 1500 — the oldest ones out there, they're a single carriage, rattling away since the 1920s — or a bubble-style 4600 from the 1950s. atm.it

PIAZZA GAE AULENTI: For a taste of modern Milan, head to the skyscraper-rimmed area around Porta Garibaldi station. Centred round an enormous water feature, Piazza Gae Aulenti has boutiques (Chiara Ferragni, Italy's answer to Kim Kardashian, has a store), restaurants, bars and prime views of the Bosco Verticale, an apartment complex swamped in plants, which have turned it into a vertical forest. ◻



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Milan has two airports, Malpensa and Linate. The former is better served but is an hour from the centre; Linate is a 20-minute drive. ITA Airways flies from Heathrow and London City to Linate, while EasyJet flies from Gatwick. British Airways flies to both from Heathrow. Malpensa is served by Ryanair from Manchester and Stansted, by Wizz Air from Gatwick, and by EasyJet from airports including Birmingham and Edinburgh. Both airports have regular coach links. The Malpensa Express train runs between the central station and Malpensa. ita-airways.com easyjet.com ba.com ryanair.com wizzair.com

Average flight time: 2h.

Overland, take the Eurostar to Paris and then the Frecciarossa high-speed train direct to Milan. eurostar.com trenitalia.com

The centre is walkable but for other areas it's best to take a tram or use the Metro.

WHEN TO GO

Milanese summers are hot and humid, with temperatures hitting the 30s. Spring is sunny and warm, hovering around 20C; the weather tends to be nice in early autumn, too, usually around the low 20s. It's quieter in winter, with temperatures around 4C, but the humidity makes it feel bitingly cold. It's best to avoid Fashion Weeks (February and September) and Design Week (April), when hotel rates soar.

MORE INFO

yesmilano.it

Milan: The Monocle Travel Guide Series. RRP: £15

HOW TO DO IT

Kirker Holidays offers four nights at the Echo hotel from £898 per person, including flights, tickets to Pinoteca di Brera and private transfers. kirkerholidays.com

Francesca Grignaffini sets up private clients with top-tier guides. Made-to-measure itineraries start from €150 (£130). instagram.com/griff_fra

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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RIVIERA MAYA (MEXICO) and IBIZA (SPAIN).

Cayman Islands

Which island is right for you?

From cosmopolitan Grand Cayman and wild Cayman Brac to tranquil Little Cayman, each of these Caribbean islands offers something unique. Words: Zoe Mcintyre

PLACE ORDERS HERE
525-7477
FISH SOUP $5

The tri-island archipelago, located in the western Caribbean Sea and 150 miles from Cuba, is known for its postcard-perfect beaches, tangerine sunsets and poolside cocktails, but there's so much more to the Cayman Islands. Dig a little deeper and you'll find a treasure trove of cultural sites, adventurous activities and natural beauty. The idyllic island trio comprises Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. Each has plenty to offer, be it hiking trails or a sophisticated culinary scene, meaning there's an ideal island for every type of traveller.

GRAND CAYMAN

BEST FOR: CULTURE & CUISINE

As the largest of the three islands, Grand Cayman is the ultimate beach break, with the added appeal of cultural treasures and top-notch cuisine. Close to the elegant hotels of Seven Mile Beach, the capital, George Town, is home to the Cayman Islands National Museum, showcasing artefacts from the region's seafaring past. More history can be uncovered in Bodden Town, the island's first settlement, while the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands exhibits Caymanian paintings and sculptures. For nature-lovers, the Mastic Trail cuts through dense forest, while the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park is the place to spot endemic blue iguanas.

You can spot wildlife beyond the shoreline, too. The journey by boat to Stingray City ends in a shallow sandbar, where rays swim elegantly by. Grand Cayman is ideal for food-lovers, too. Colourful beachside shacks offer fresh local fish cooked on the barbecue, while there are plenty of restaurants serving up inventive farm-to-table and sea-to-plate menus.

LITTLE CAYMAN

BEST FOR: FIRST-CLASS DIVING

The smallest island in the archipelago, Little Cayman is a tiny slice of coral-and-sand paradise. It's 10 miles long, one mile wide and home to fewer than 200 residents. With swathes of empty beaches, this diminutive isle is blissfully peaceful, surrounded by pristine waters named by Jacques Cousteau as among the finest in the world for diving. The island's Bloody Bay Wall beckons underwater enthusiasts to its dramatic vertical cliff, which starts in the shallows and drops to a depth of 1,000ft. Fantastic visibility allows for close-up encounters with big-lipped groupers, stripey sergeant majors and massive spotted eagle rays, not to mention reef sharks and sea turtles.

Back on dry land, the flat landscape of Little Cayman lends itself to bicycle exploration, with opportunities to stop off in secluded bays for a spot of snorkelling. Few places capture Little Cayman's understated magic more than Point of Sand; its blindingly white sands, fringed by a blue lagoon, are free of development, so pack a picnic and spend the day here. Alternatively, kayak to Owen Island, a tiny islet off the southwest coast, where there's rarely another soul in sight.

CAYMAN BRAC

BEST FOR: JAW-DROPPING SCENERY

Adventurers can plan an action-packed getaway on Cayman Brac, blessed with the most striking scenery of all three islands thanks to The Bluff, a towering limestone plateau. Hiking trails crisscross the island, offering the chance to spot indigenous and migratory birdlife. Brown boobies nest on the edge of The Bluff, frigatebirds glide above the sea cliffs and the endangered West Indian whistling ducks paddle around the Salt Water Pond, a sanctuary on the south coast.

The rocky island also has hundreds of climbing routes, attracting novice and seasoned climbers alike to scale The Bluff while waves crash below. It's also pocketed by 170 craggy limestone caves, many accessible by foot or a short climb. Popular caving spots include Bat Cave, where shining a flashlight into the gloomy caverns reveals hordes of resident fruit bats. Another is Great Cave, which requires a challenging climb via a near-vertical ladder but rewards with beautiful formations of stalagmites and stalactites.

Clockwise from top: Cayman Brac's iconic Bluff; Heritage Kitchen selling fish and fruit juice, Grand Cayman; relaxed Southern Cross Club, Little Cayman

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Grand Cayman can be reached from London with one stop, taking about 12 hours. At present there are no direct flights from the UK. However, hopping between the three islands is quick and easy, as Cayman Airways operates multiple inter-island flights daily. Find out more at *visitcaymanislands.com*

CAYMAN
ISLANDS
GRAND CAYMAN | CAYMAN BRAC | LITTLE CAYMAN

IMAGES: CAYMAN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM; JAMESCARNEGIEPHOTOGRAPHY

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ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THE ANSWERS…

THE EXPERTS

Sarah Barrell
Senior editor, *Food by National Geographic Traveller* (UK)

Gemma Bowes
Travel writer and editor

Ben Clatworthy
Transport correspondent, *The Times*

Camilla Hewitt
Editor, *Well Curated* magazine

Laura Lindsay
Travel expert, Skyscanner

Clockwise from right: The number 28 tram in Lisbon, Portugal; the Bald Head Walking trail in Albany, Western Australia; a dish of grilled prawns at the Watergate Bay, Cornwall

IMAGES: GETTY; KATE WHITAKER

I'd like to go on a European city break with my two kids over October half-term. Where's reasonably priced? Post Office Travel Money regularly crowns Lisbon as Europe's cheapest city break. Set around seven hills, the Portuguese capital has trams and cliff-scaling lifts to excite young transport buffs, with *miradouros* (viewpoints) to stop at for fresh orange juice and strong coffee.

Sprawled across one of these hills is Castelo de São Jorge, with views of Ponte 25 de Abril astride the River Tagus. Or see the bridge up close on the ferry from Cais do Sodré to Cacilhas, where affordable restaurants serve croquettes, fried fish and black squid-ink pasta. In Belém, the Maritime Museum has scavenger hunts so kids can learn about explorer Vasco da Gama and the Age of Discovery; a few minutes' walk away, Pastéis de Belém has custard tarts made to an old recipe from the Jerónimos Monastery. Get free entry into attractions and transport with a Lisbon Card (children €13.50/£11.60 per day; adults €21/£18). lisboacard.org

The Chiado neighbourhood has a good choice of self-catering apartments, with *booking.com* currently listing family suites from £100 per night. Alternatively, choose a package for your trip: three nights in late October in a family room at Tryp Lisboa Caparica Mar costs from £220 per person, complete with Wizz Air flights from Luton. loveholidays.com

SARAH BARRELL

Among Italy's best-value cities, Trieste, on the Slovenian border, has an interesting Mitteleuropean cultural mix. Wander between elegant squares, pausing for cake at Viennese-style coffee houses, before visiting the 19th-century Miramare Castle. Children can spot pineapple motifs throughout the interiors and play in the exotic gardens. miramare.beniculturali.it

The food is wonderful — from various gelato flavours to Austrian-style canteens serving slabs of pork and sausage. Or hike the nearby limestone karst hills and one of the region's 50-or-so *osmizas*, pop-up restaurants run by local wine and food producers. discover-trieste.it

It's great value, even in high season. An apartment for four at Victoria Hotel Letterario, a literary-themed hotel in the former home of the writer James Joyce, costs €754 (£650), room only, for five nights during October half-term. hotelvictoriatrieste.com

GEMMA BOWES

What are my rights if my holiday is disrupted by wildfire, as witnessed in Greece and Italy recently? Passengers booked on package trips — defined when two or more components, for example flights and hotel, are booked in one transaction — are afforded the best protection under the Package Travel Regulations (PTRs). These put the onus on the travel provider to deliver the holiday as sold: if you're abroad and your hotel is evacuated, for example, it falls to the provider to find alternative accommodation or get you home earlier.

The PTRs also state that holidaymakers can cancel for a refund "if unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances occur at the [...] destination or its immediate vicinity, which significantly affect the performance of the package". This means that, if you're due to travel to an affected area, you can ask for a refund or an alternative — though most tour operators made proactive decisions to cancel trips during the recent wildfires.

For people who have booked DIY trips, the options are more complicated, and a comprehensive travel insurance policy is vital. According to the Association of British Insurers, "if your policy includes trip disruption or natural disaster cover, you should be covered if you have to cut short or cancel your holiday due to the ongoing wildfires". If you're abroad and need to book some new accommodation, discuss with your insurer what costs will be covered. **BEN CLATWORTHY**

I'm looking for a seaside hotel in Britain with a good spa for a short break. Where do you suggest? The South West has the widest variety of seaside spa hotels. The Scarlet is an adults-only escape with an ayurvedic spa overlooking Mawgan Porth beach on the north coast of Cornwall. Treatments, which include massages, meditation and bathing rituals, will give you a taste of Indian healing techniques; outside, swim in the pool or walk a section of the South West Coast Path. Doubles from £245, B&B. scarlethotel.co.uk

Watergate Bay, a short drive from The Scarlet, is suitable for families. Children can play in the hotel's Kids' Zone while you indulge in a spa treatment. A two-mile beach, surf lessons and seafood are all part of the appeal. Doubles from £250, B&B. watergatebay.co.uk

Facing Falmouth's Blue Flag Gyllyngvase Beach on Cornwall's south coast, St Michaels Resort is equipped for active spa breaks, with over 100 fitness classes each week. Post-workout, slip into the hydrothermal pool or unwind with an Elemis massage. Doubles from £130, B&B. stmichaelsresort.com

For alternatives to Cornwall, The Gallivant in East Sussex delivers on coastal calm. This 20-room boutique hotel is mere steps away from the Camber Sands shoreline. Massage and facial treatments are available in the spa cabin, tucked away in a quiet corner of the garden. Doubles from £165, B&B. thegallivant.co.uk
CAMILLA HEWITT

I want to fly to Australia in the new year and have a multi-day stopover en route. What's the best-value way to do this? Turning a stopover into a mini break can be a great way to visit more than one country in a single trip *and* find a great flight deal. If you're looking to fly to Australia from the UK, it's the perfect opportunity to capitalise on a layover in Asia. For example, flying from London direct into Perth in February 2024 will set you back £907, while flying via Kuala Lumpur with Malaysia Airlines, it costs £695.

A handy tip when looking for great-value stopover routes is to think about which airports process a high number of flights, as this often leads to lower prices. Major airline hubs include Hong Kong for Cathay Pacific and Kuala Lumpur for Malaysia Airlines. You could also check out the region's low-cost airlines, such as Singapore's Scoot or Air Asia out of Kuala Lumpur.

There are other factors to consider besides ticket prices, including differences in airline baggage allowances. If you're weighing up options based on price, research how much you're likely to spend during the stopover break, and consider foreign exchange rates. Accommodation in Singapore, for example, can be much more expensive than in Bangkok.

Shopping and being flexible with dates is key. Skyscanner's multi-city search tool is a helpful resource if you want to easily compare flight prices — you can split your journey into up to six legs. Setting up price alert emails can also keep track of any discounts. skyscanner.net
LAURA LINDSAY

THE INFO

Turkey

REPUBLIC DAY IN TURKEY, ON 29 OCTOBER, HAS EXTRA SIGNIFICANCE THIS YEAR AS THE MODERN STATE TURNS 100 — DELVE DEEPER WITH SOME LESSER-KNOWN TURKISH FACTS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BACK STORY

The ethnic name 'Türk' goes back at least 1,400 years, but before 1923 it described just one group in the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, whose ruling sultan lived in Constantinople (now Istanbul)

REINVENTED

The Ottoman defeat in the First World War and the loss of most of their non-Turkish-speaking lands kicked off a revolution that saw the sultans replaced with a republic

DOT THE U

'Turkey' was an informal English name for Ottoman lands even in the 14th century, but Turkish authorities now promote the native spelling Türkiye, partly to avoid association with the bird

TRADE NAME

One theory for why an American bird got named 'turkey' is that the first 16th-century English imports of the large fowl came via Turkish merchants from distant Constantinople

East and west

ONLY 3.4% OF TURKISH TERRITORY IS IN EUROPE, WITH THE REST IN ASIA, BUT THAT PART IS HOME TO AROUND 15% OF THE POPULATION

Capital idea

IN OCTOBER 1923, ANKARA REPLACED ISTANBUL, HOME OF THE DEPOSED SULTAN, AS THE TURKISH CAPITAL

Woolly thinking

ANKARA WAS ONCE KNOWN AS ANGORA, AND GAVE ITS NAME TO EXTRA-FLUFFY LOCAL BREEDS OF RABBIT, GOAT AND CAT

Some Turkish superlatives

1,300

Number of cups of tea drunk, on average, per person per year in Turkey — it has the world's highest estimated tea consumption

6,637ft

Main span of the world's longest suspension bridge — the 1915 Çanakkale Bridge over the Dardanelles, opened in 2022

64%

Share of the world's hazelnut crop produced by Turkey — the nut is widely used in Turkish sweets and to make Nutella

1936

The year Sabiha Gökçen, then 23, became the world's first female fighter pilot — Istanbul's second airport is named after her

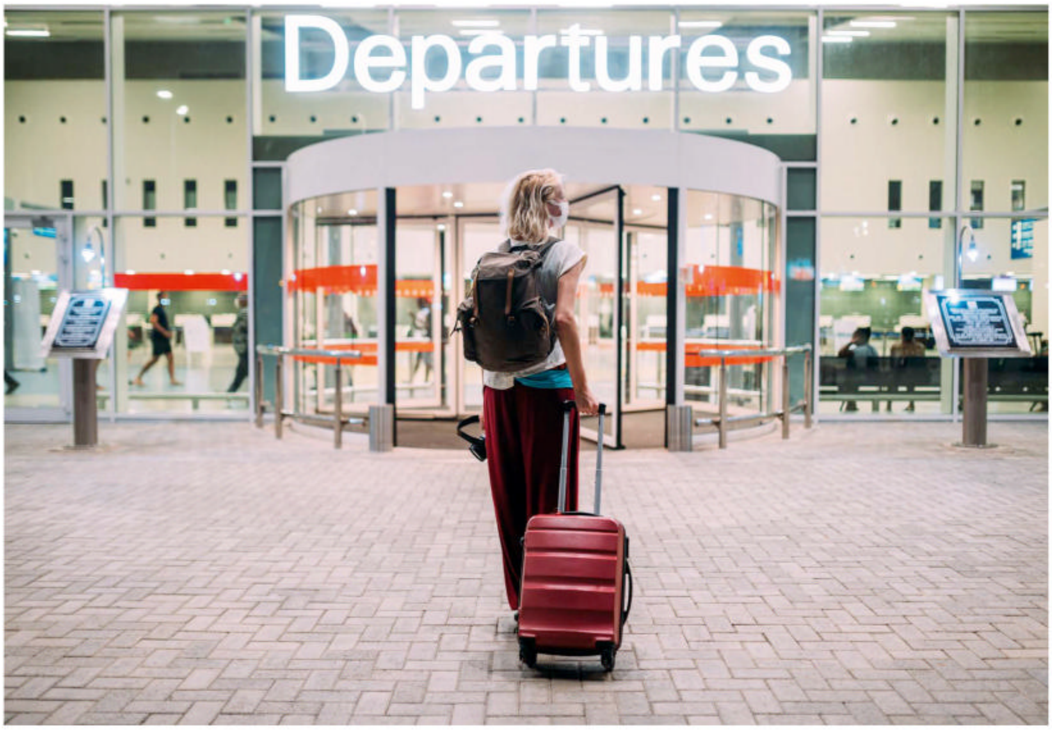
Sources: dezeen.com fao.org guinnessworldrecords.com hurriyetdailynews.com npr.org

WORDS: RORY GOULDING. IMAGES: GETTY

HOT TOPIC

COVID & TRAVEL

With rules relaxed, it can be hard to know what to do if you test positive before a trip. Does catching the virus still spell the end for your plans?



Compulsory PCR tests, face masks, vaccination certificates — at the height of the pandemic, travel meant navigating reams of red tape and checking a long list of requirements before you'd even set foot on a plane. Now the rules have been relaxed, travellers are largely responsible for making their own decisions should they test positive. From the legal requirements to the moral debate, here's what you need to know.

What's the official advice? In the UK, there's no legal requirement to self-isolate if you test positive for the virus, and current NHS advice for adults is to 'try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for five days'. So travelling with Covid is permitted — but you have to accept that you risk passing the virus to others.

Which countries still impose restrictions? Europe has scrapped all Covid entry rules, but it's worth noting that some countries in the rest of the world still don't let you travel freely. Tourist destinations such as the Philippines, Bolivia and China still have entry requirements in place; for example, the latter insists that visitors take a lateral flow/rapid antigen test at least 48 hours before boarding a flight, among other restrictions.

While many operators, including airlines, have removed the requirement to wear a mask while travelling, some countries including China insist on it in some circumstances.

To avoid unnecessary surprises on arrival, consult the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO) travel advice pages for each country that you're planning to visit or travel through. Take note of the entry requirements section, which will show whether the destination currently has any Covid-specific rules or restrictions in place. gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

Should I still cancel my trip if I test positive? Now that travellers are largely no longer legally obliged to take a test or disclose the result, it's important to make an informed decision. No one wants to miss out on a planned trip, but virologist Stephen Griffin encourages people to "prioritise the most vulnerable people in our society". According to the Office for National Statistics, the risk of death involving Covid remains significantly greater for the immunocompromised — on your next flight, for example, you could be sitting next to someone who's more vulnerable because they've just finished chemotherapy. The guilt of potentially infecting other travellers could be enough to cast a shadow over any getaway.

How easy is it to change your travel plans? Often, it's not very easy at all. Most operators have scrapped cancellation policies introduced during the pandemic, and are well within their rights to tell you to take the trip or forfeit your rights if you test positive.

Travel writer Lottie Gross recently found herself wrangling with a campsite for a refund after notifying the owners she'd tested positive and being asked by them to stay away. "I don't entirely regret my decision to inform the campsite of my Covid infection," she says, "but it was a little frustrating to be told I couldn't go and that I also couldn't have a refund."

If this happens, there may still be options open to you. "You could claim on your travel insurance if your policy covers it and you're able to provide evidence of your positive test," says Confused.com's lifestyle insurance expert Matthew Harwood. "This will vary depending on the provider and their specific terms and conditions, so always double-check what you'll be covered for before buying a policy."

It's also worth checking the small print in your travel booking, as your terms and conditions could legally compel you to divulge test results to your tour operator, accommodation provider or airline.

What precautions should I take if I still want to travel? If you test positive ahead of a trip and want to minimise the risk of spreading the infection, Professor Griffin advises taking "every precaution to reduce interactions with other people". He says: "Stay outside (on a ferry deck, for example) or in well-ventilated spaces if possible, and wear a well-fitted, filtering respirator mask, ideally an FFP3, unless distanced from others." **ESTELLA SHARDLOW**

REPORT

THE FUTURE OF HOSTELLING

AS THE YHA ANNOUNCES PLANS TO SELL OFF A NUMBER OF HOSTELS IN THE UK AND TRAVELLERS COMPLAIN OF SPIRALLING BED PRICES ACROSS EUROPE, WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY. WORDS: LORNA PARKES

When German teacher Richard Schirrmann converted a former classroom to accommodate young travellers on a budget in 1909, no one could have predicted the global movement he would inspire. Three years later, Schirrmann bought a castle near Dortmund to establish the world's first youth hostel and by the 1920s, Germany had 2,000 low-cost hostels dotted around its rural areas. But it wasn't until a group of Brits brought the idea back to the UK and launched the Youth Hostels Association (YHA) in 1930 that the new movement gained its poster child.

This July, after more than 90 years in operation, the charitable organisation announced it will sell off 20 of its 150 hostels. Given the hammer blows of the pandemic, it wasn't wholly unexpected. YHA's affiliated New Zealand organisation collapsed in December 2021, with the loss of 11 hostels. By December 2022, 19 of YHA Australia's hostels were also permanently shuttered, and the country's Nomads hostel brand shut down or sold six of its 16 properties.

"All hostel organisations around the world were really badly affected by the pandemic, because obviously we're relying on people sharing space," says YHA chief executive James Blake. "We lost 80% of our income in the first year of the pandemic and 50% in the second year — that's about £70m in all." He points out that it wasn't until April 2022 that hostels were finally able to operate normally again in the UK, when shared dorms reopened.

For the YHA, the aftermath of the pandemic brought what Blake describes as a "perfect storm" of challenges: inflation (labour, laundry, food), spiralling energy costs and the cost-of-living crisis. It's this, coupled with depleted financial reserves, that's forced it to sell off 13% of its UK hostels.

Despite this latest blow to the industry, demand for hostel beds doesn't appear to have dropped much — the YHA says guest numbers are now running at about 90% of pre-Covid levels. And according to data from online travel agent and booking site Hostelworld, in November 2022 bed bookings in some countries around the world surpassed 2019 levels. Although the hostel market is still strongest in Europe — accounting for 50% of bookings on the Hostelworld platform — bookings have soared in countries that have historically been cheaper to travel in, such as Egypt (up 106%), Turkey (67%), Guatemala (87%), Mexico (55%) and Laos (33%).

Price is certainly one of the biggest challenges right now. Anecdotally, it's thought that many cities are operating at half the hostel bed capacity they were before the pandemic. To offset spiralling costs, hostels have leaned more heavily on price surging — increasing prices when demand for them is greatest. As a result, the cost of dorm beds has rocketed, in line with the double whammy of high demand and low capacity. The rising number of solo travellers has only increased demand for hostel beds further.

Finding new value

"The days when you could travel on a 2p Ryanair flight and spend €10 on a hostel bed are not coming back," says Kash Bhattacharya, who runs the Budget Traveller website and is the author of *The Grand Hostels: Luxury Hostels of the World*. Although Bhattacharya has seen the cost of travel increase across the board, he believes it's most noticeable — and keenly felt — when it comes to hostels because they've always been seen as a bastion of cheap travel.

In Europe, prices have become notably higher in key cities, where overtourism is an issue. As Bhattacharya says: "If you're willing to get off the beaten path, there's still a lot of value. But if you want to go to places like London or Rome, there are too many people travelling and you're always going to pay over the odds for a hostel."

Oliver Jakes, a 23-year-old who's just returned from three months biking between European cities, says he found hostel prices had doubled since he took his last trip, Interrailing through Europe in 2018. "This time around, if I found a dorm bed for under £40, I'd be happily surprised," he says. And to get these prices, he needed to book around four weeks in advance, leaving little room for the spontaneity that traditionally came with backpacking.

To cut down on costs, Jakes camped between visits to big cities, but he says he found most Interrailers headed straight to city-centre hostels because they were travelling on foot. Higher

IMAGE: GENERATOR

prices in cities such as Paris, Copenhagen and Amsterdam meant he had to cut back on other things like food and comfort. "More centrally located hostels were more expensive but they also had worse conditions," he says. "In Oslo, I paid £50 for a bed but it was just horrible: very hot, with 14 people to a room and only one bathroom between all of us."

Ultimately, Jakes believes, the key aspect that keeps young people booking is the social scene that's at the core of the hostelling experience. "Hostels are still a good option if you want to go out, because they're a good way to meet people," he says. "I think a lot of hostels can set a higher price because they're essentially charging you for entry into the hostel's social sphere. It's like paying to enter a club."

It also seems to be the case that the hostels which offer something more are the ones that are excelling in the post-pandemic world. "I always say the mark of a great hostel is when the staff and the owner give you the keys to the city," says Bhattacharya. For him, experience is king. That might mean impromptu city tours, in-house cooking lessons or insider recommendations.

He cites Bogentrakt, a new, independent hostel that opened in Switzerland this year, and which he visited in the summer. It's the first hostel to open in the small Alpine town of Chur, occupying a former prison in the historic centre. "It's a beautiful hostel and there was a whole mix of characters there — a young family, a film crew, backpackers from Finland," he says. "Marco Leibundgut, the owner, cooked up this classically Swiss dish called *capuns*. Nobody paid for this. It's the type of experience you'd have had 20 years ago in a hostel — drinking and eating together, and just talking."

Community & connection

That type of experience might explain why Airbnb hasn't had as much of an impact on the hostel industry as some observers initially predicted. At its roots, travel will always be about connection and the current Airbnb model is a far cry from its original intention to help independent travellers connect with locals in their own homes. On a social level, rarely can the Airbnb experience compete with the community aspect of hostelling, and that sense of community is particularly strong in the independent hostel market.

Here, owner-managers have a vested interest in ensuring their guests experience their home city in the best possible way. In recent years, some have also diversified to increase their appeal: spare lounges have been converted into co-working spaces to cater for digital nomads; aperitivo hours and karaoke nights are creating social opportunities for solo travellers; and dorms have been carved up into private rooms to appeal to those seeking more seclusion in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Some, such as The Beehive hostel in Rome, were forced to diversify during the pandemic. While The Beehive offered cooking classes and family-style dinner nights before 2020, owner Steve Brenner — a keen baker — launched his Beehive Bagels business in October 2020, as a way to make ends meet during lockdowns. Bagels had always been served at the breakfast table in The Beehive, but by the time the hostel emerged on the other side of the pandemic, Beehive Bagels had become a fully blown business, delivering all over Italy.

Alongside the evolution of the independent hostel, there's been a rise in private-equity-backed, branded hostels — and these players are doing a good job at differentiating themselves, building on the 'flashpacker' (backpacking with a bigger budget) trend that took off in the decade before the pandemic.

Top of the game is Generator, a boutique brand of 16 hostels in key 'honeypot' cities around

A social space at Generator Paris
From left: Rue Greneta, Paris; Rome's Beehive hostel diversified by opening a bagel business
Previous pages: The bar-restaurant at Generator Venice

Europe and the US, including Venice, London, New York and Los Angeles. Their interiors are heavily design-led and many come with extras such as shuffleboard bars, karaoke and DJ nights, and swimming pools. Its owners also run the Broken Shaker bar chain — which features on the US section of The World's 50 Best Bars list — and are starting to introduce them into Generator hostels. Prices run from £30 for a dorm bed to over £800 a night for a suite in New York.

All these bells and whistles come at a price, but it appears plenty of travellers are willing to pay. CEO Alastair Thomann says Generator has never been more profitable — and its nightly rates are now the highest they've ever been. "We sell out every night," he says. "I think what we're doing differently to a lot of the other properties out there is that you're essentially getting the same amenities and the same surroundings and quality as a really good lifestyle hotel — but you can have an entry-level price point by just buying a bed."

Thomann adds that one of Generator's fastest-growing markets post-pandemic is families, a trend also witnessed by Blake at the YHA. "If you want to do a city location nowadays, four-star hotels have become completely unaffordable," says Thomann. "So you move together as a family and take a four-, six- or eight-bed dorm, and it will end up probably 50% cheaper than staying in a three- or four-star hotel. If you go to Amsterdam, Rome, Venice, wherever — how much time are you really spending in your room anyway?"

The space-sharing economy that underpins the industry is also what makes hostels one of the most sustainable ways to travel. In September last year, a report by sustainability testing and certification specialist Bureau Veritas, conducted in partnership with Hostelworld, found hostels only have 25% of the carbon impact of hotels. Bhattacharya believes they're innately sustainable because of their role as "guardians of the local community", encouraging travellers to go out and spend money in the local area rather than tucking them away, as an all-inclusive resort might do.

Hostels may be evolving, but if the industry can hold onto its core values of connection, community and sustainability, they will always have a formative role to play in how we, as travellers, grow up and see the world.

> **"I always say** the mark of a great hostel is when the staff and the owner give you the keys to the city"

FIVE HOSTELS doing things differently

JO & JOE, HOSSEGOR
Near Biarritz, in France, this hostel has an in-house bar and beehives in the garden. The front desk can book surfing lessons or rent bikes and skateboards. joandjoe.com

GOODMORNING SOLO TRAVELLER HOSTEL, LISBON
On top of free walking tours and a daily 'power hour' with free drinks, this hostel offers an all-inclusive rate option. goodmorninghostel.com

THE BEEHIVE, ROME
Aperitivo hour and pasta-making classes are both part of the package at this independent hostel owned by an American couple. the-beehive.com

DOWNTOWN FOREST, VILNIUS
This hostel gets the local community involved via live-music events and barbecue rentals. It also offers tent pitches and cabins in its grounds. downtownforest.lt

ART HOSTEL, LEEDS
The rooms here were designed by grassroots artists, to showcase their work, and the hostel acts as a networking space for the local creative community. arthostel.org.uk

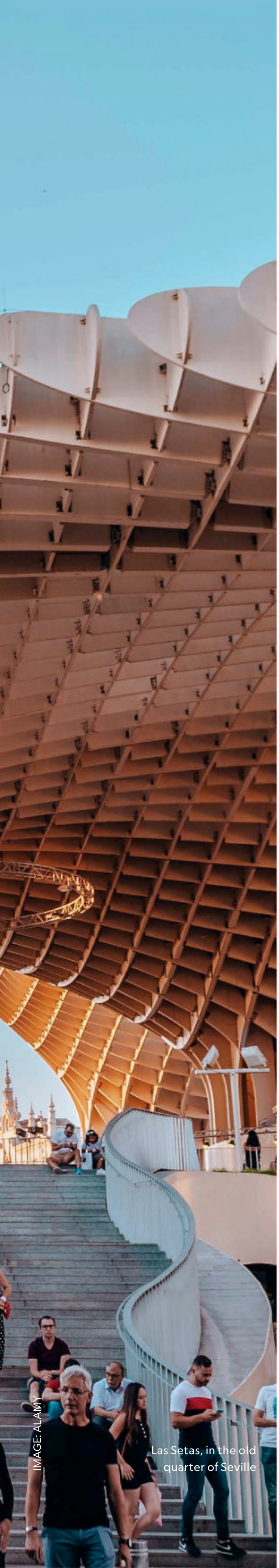
IMAGES: GENERATOR; ALAMY; GETTY

EUROPE

Cities of innovation

Seville, Paphos and Kranj are paving the way for improved accessibility and green initiatives. These are the cities making a difference. Words: Laura Price

PLAZA MAYOR



Las Setas, in the old quarter of Seville

Innovation is more important than ever for destinations looking to adapt to the rapidly changing world. Today, many travel hotspots are focusing on creative solutions to welcome people from all backgrounds and improve accessibility. While providing improved access and digital tools for visitors, the most innovative cities are also simultaneously helping their local communities and economies by improving recreational spaces, preserving nature and encouraging people to shop local.

Initiatives like the European Capital of Smart Tourism and European Destination of Excellence celebrate forward-thinking practices in cities across the continent. Here are some of the ways this year's winners, Seville, Paphos and Kranj, are paving the way for more enjoyable and inclusive travel.

SEVILLE, SPAIN

The capital of Andalucia has long been popular for its striking Moorish architecture and abundant sunshine, but it's fast emerging as a centre of innovation, too. Firstly, there are a number of apps that have made it on to the scene to assist all. Top among these is the multi-language Seville Accessible app, which offers information on accessibility and mobility, as well as regular updates on just how crowded a public space is, making it safer and easier for those with disabilities to enjoy the city's sights and sounds. The app's features also include a map that updates in real-time, alerting users to any obstacles or road conditions that could impact their trip.

Seville is rich in World Heritage Sites, with attractions including the cathedral, the Alcázar and the Indies Archives. All three can now be better explored with the help of the World Heritage app and portal, along with thousands of other sites worldwide, meaning instant information for visitors — and goodbye to paper pamphlets.

Separately, visitors can download the Real Alcazar de Sevilla app that uses augmented and virtual reality to provide an enhanced experience of the Alcázar of Seville, the famous walled royal palaces filled with historical treasures and surrounded by magnificent gardens.

Also available is Kleos Sevilla, an app that plays different sounds when users approach certain flowers and plants — essentially providing a live soundtrack and an enriched experience.

Seville has also employed various initiatives to make the city a cleaner and more navigable place for visitors and residents. These include extensions to tram, train and bus networks, as well as a pilot project to turn the Cartuja neighbourhood into a low-emission zone, and plans to protect air quality in areas that receive high numbers of visitors.

As a city that's feeling the effects of climate change, with summer temperatures soaring, Seville is also involved in international collaborations such as Life Watercool, a project that aims to optimise water consumption and help the city to adapt to heat waves.

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PAPHOS, CYPRUS

Once the capital of Cyprus, the entire city of Paphos is on the UNESCO World Heritage list, with attractions including the Archaeological Park of Kato Paphos, an ancient Byzantine fort built in the 13th century and a beautiful Old Town made up of twisting cobbled streets.

Thanks to some digital innovation, some of Paphos' most iconic sites can now be experienced in a new and exciting way. When visiting the archaeological park, for example, visitors can download an app that provides an audio guide in several languages, giving interesting facts on many of the monuments. Virtual tours guide travellers around the site, showcasing hidden corners and tucked-away treasures. Getting there is made easier with the new Smart Parking system, which uses residents' and visitors' smartphones to provide real-time updates on available parking slots.

Paphos also has more than 400 miles of cycle paths in and around the city, with scenic routes supported by signs featuring QR codes known as Smart Signs; these provide in-depth information to help cyclists get around.

Out of the saddle, the city encourages tourism on foot, with an abundance of nature trails winding around the area. Consider the Ezousa Nature Trail, a moderate five-mile walk taking in a viewpoint from the village church, dedicated to Saint Ilarion the Great and perched on a hill above Paphos.

The environment takes priority here, and Paphos' local beaches are pristine sweeps of golden sand, while many have been awarded Blue Flag status for their impeccable water quality. Furthering environmental efforts, there are also low-carbon, e-mobility systems such as electric minibuses, e-ticketing and e-vehicle charging stations.

Paphos is making strides to becoming more accessible, with the coastal area and Old Town connected by an electric bus service. Smart bus shelters provide audio and video services and ramps make tourist attractions far easier to navigate.

While all-inclusive hotels were once a top choice, visitors are encouraged to consider local alternatives, boosting spending on shopping, dining and art and craft workshops to support local businesses and economy.

From above: Concerts, cultural and sporting events are held in Kranj in the summer; Paphos' beautiful harbour

IMAGES: ALAMY; ZTKK, JOŠT GANTAR

KRANJ, SLOVENIA

Known as the capital of the Slovenian Alps and a city seeped in history, Kranj is surrounded by snow-capped mountains and bursts with charm, sandwiched between Ljubljana and the stunning Lake Bled.

Getting around Kranj is easy; the city has the biggest bike rental network in Slovenia. There's no need for cyclists to buy bottled water here, either, thanks to the 12 drinking fountains that have been installed. Gorenjska bike is a sharing system covering seven municipalities, where you can rent a bike in one place and return it in another. More than 40% of bikes are electric and there are over 50 stations, so there's the option to go further afield, taking in gems such as the pretty towns of Radovljica and Škofja Loka.

Getting around in a green way has been a real focus point in this city. The Sustainable Mobility Centre, opened in 2021, offers information on how to navigate Kranj in an environmentally friendly way, from car and bike sharing to public transport.

What's more, the city also officially opened the Slovenian National Anthem Park, a new green space that connects nature with cultural heritage, and won the silver Sejalec for its underground tunnels initiative.

Located in the city's 110-foot-long Second World War tunnels, which run underneath the old town, the SOS Info Centre Proteus reveals the curious and little-known lives of endangered olms, Europe's only cave-dwelling vertebrate.

Visitors keen to try local food can join the Kranj Long Table, a 100-person dining experience held in the manicured gardens of Khislstein Castle. With a goal of promoting planet-friendly practices, such as avoiding single-use plastic, it also serves seasonal, locally sourced produce, and encourages diners to take leftovers home. From Khislstein Castle to the city's ancient church bell tower, heritage is painstakingly preserved in Kranj. Visitors can wander its winding streets is to see the past and the future sitting beautifully side by side.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Seville and Paphos are the 2023 European Smart Tourism Capitals and Kranj is the 2023 winner of the European Destination of Excellence (EDEN). For more information, visit *smart-tourism-capital.ec.europa.eu*

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IMAGE: GETTY

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IMAGE: MATT DUTILE

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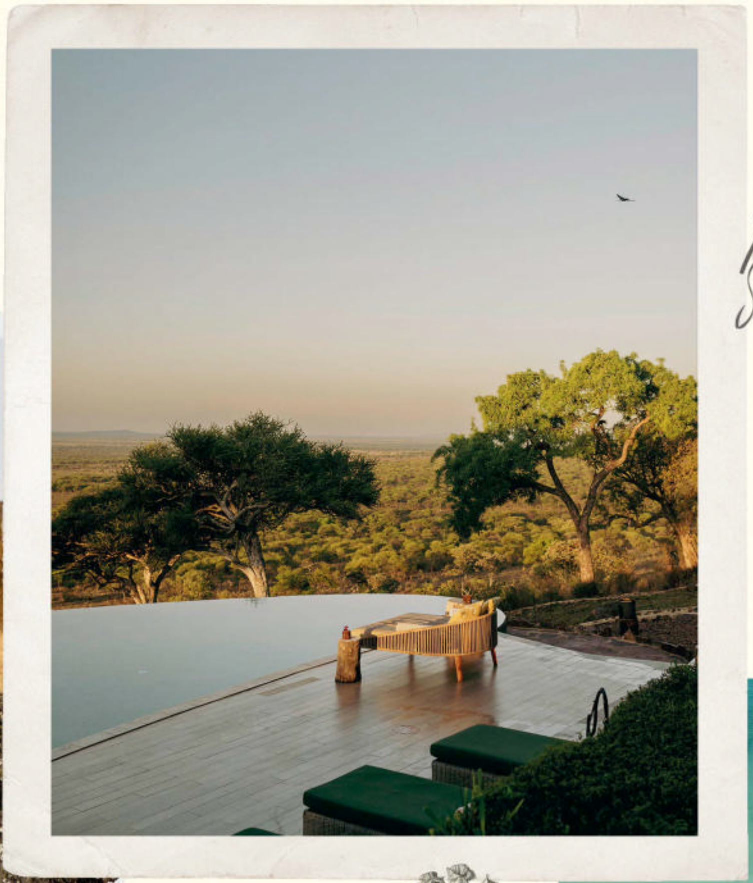

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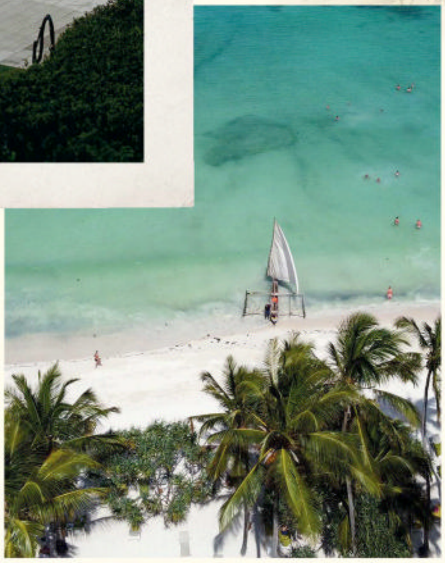

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SWITZERLAND

Discover Zurich's plant-based pioneers

Tap into the creative cuisine of Switzerland's largest city on a vegetarian tour that takes in the most forward-thinking food spots in town. Words: Anna Hart

"People feed on good ideas in Zurich," announces Ity Tiwari, an Indian-born, Zurich-based vegetarian food blogger and chef. "As a vegetarian, I'm continually delighted by the creativity and quality of dishes here. But I'm just as obsessed with Zurich's humanity and the determination to do things the right way, with many restaurants pioneering zero-waste and community-driven initiatives."

Lunch is a little earlier than expected on our gastronomic tour: we're headed to the new company canteen at On, in Zurich-West. On is one of Switzerland's best-loved brands, producing Swiss-engineered footwear with a cult following. "On have collaborated with a local vegan eatery called Roots to develop Switzerland's first 100% plant-based office canteen," Ity explains. Roots Food Lab — next to the On flagship store — is also open to the public and stars such as Roger Federer have been spotted dining here. An airy, contemporary space, it feels like the workplace of the future — and the vegan buffet is equally pleasing.

The On canteen may be a new development, but we are about to learn that Zurich has long been forward-thinking when it comes to food. Our next stop is Haus Hiltl, which opened in 1898 and is recognised by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest continually open vegetarian restaurant. Here, the in-house, plant-based butcher's shop, Hiltl Vegimetzg, is Switzerland's first. Visit for vegan wines, plant milks, cookbooks and innovative plant-based deli meat alternatives.

Hiltl's Milo Stegmann explains that although only 5% of the Swiss population is strictly vegetarian, many more of Zurich's citizens regularly enjoy meat-free meals. "In Zurich people eat a vegan lunch without even noticing it's vegan," he says.

Hiltl may be a historic institution, but it's not content to rely on heritage alone. I ask about community impact and sustainability, and Milo replies: "We took avocados off the menu as we had ethical concerns about water waste, so our chefs developed an alternative pea-based guacamole that's really popular." With ever-evolving menus and ethical sourcing, Hiltl is one of a number of Zurich eateries championing positive change.

In the Old Town, Ity steers us into Café & Conditorei 1842, an indulgent establishment housed in a 13th-century

listed building. This historic cafe is now run by the Arbeitskette Foundation, which aims to integrate disadvantaged young people (including participants in Switzerland's migration programme) into the hospitality industry. Ity tells us they serve the best hot chocolate in the city. As I sip a deliciously creamy cup in the lavishly decorated drawing rooms, I'm inclined to agree. This is a treat on all levels.

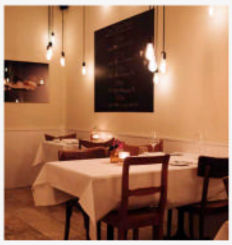
As we continue down Napfgasse, a narrow alley lined with patisseries and delicatessens, Ity points to Schwarzenbach, a heritage grocery that started specialising in bean-to-bar chocolate and fairtrade single origin coffee decades before it was fashionable.

A little further down is Äss-Bar bakery, which aims to cut down Zurich's food waste by selling day-old baked goods from the city's top bakeries at knockdown prices. "This makes quality items, like sandwiches from Sprüngli [Switzerland's best-known high-end bakery] affordable to students," explains Ity.

"Zurich is a truly international city and this makes the food scene endlessly interesting," she adds, as we dip into Zurich's answer to Harrods Food Halls — the grand basement at Jelmoli, the city's swishest department store. It's a treasure trove of Swiss and international delicacies, and one could spend hours in the condiments section alone, or tasting slivers of gouda at the cheese counter.

"It's not just the quality of the locally sourced ingredients that makes Zurich such a great city for food-lovers" says Ity. "It's the creativity and passion behind the new ventures, too. Food in Zurich isn't just about good flavours, it's about good principles."

IMAGES: CHARLY DEROUET



THREE TO TRY

HILTL: With locations across the city, Hiltl's international vegetarian buffet is now a Zurich institution. Highlights include palak paneer (spinach with Indian cottage cheese).

MARKTKÜCHE: Awarded both a Michelin star and a Michelin green star for sustainability, Marktküche's surprise tasting menu (simply choose the number of courses) is the perfect introduction to the calibre of Swiss produce and the creativity of Zurich's chefs.

MARKTHALLE: This bustling covered market hall, in hip Zurich-West, is a must-visit. Start at the grocery Berg und Tal, before moving on to the wine bar, cafe, restaurant and food stalls.

From left: Guisan Quay, Zurich; a vegetarian buffet meal at Roots Food Lab; Marktküche

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Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry, western Ireland

STAR LETTER

Family staycation

With the school holidays approaching, we felt we needed to take a short break, but trips can easily get costly. A further complication is that my child has a disability with complex needs. With this background, I was delighted to see the *UK & Ireland* guide included with the Jul/Aug issue. It inspired us to go to western Ireland and introduced us to areas we've never considered on our own doorstep in Wales. I'll be keeping my eyes out for your next issue. **GREG TASKER**

Homecoming

I just wanted to say how much I loved the June issue of the magazine with the Canada cover story. I'd never bought or read *National Geographic Traveller* (UK) before, but as a half-Canadian, I couldn't resist! It's become a well-thumbed magazine in our house over the last few months, and it's opened my eyes to how much I've yet to explore out there. In particular, the piece on planning a trip through the Rocky Mountains has been dog-eared, and flights are soon to be booked — thank you for giving me the nudge to return.

ALEX SEYMOUR

Daydreaming

It would be difficult not to be inspired by so many mesmerising pictures and interesting stories. I've torn out some pages of the Jul/Aug issue and saved them for my future travels. I've always wanted to do a safari (cover story); now I know I can do it thanks to the precious tips. I used to live in Brazil so I was also interested in the article about Belém (Eat) — the culture of this part of the country and its different kinds of food. One day I may be able to experience all of this for myself.

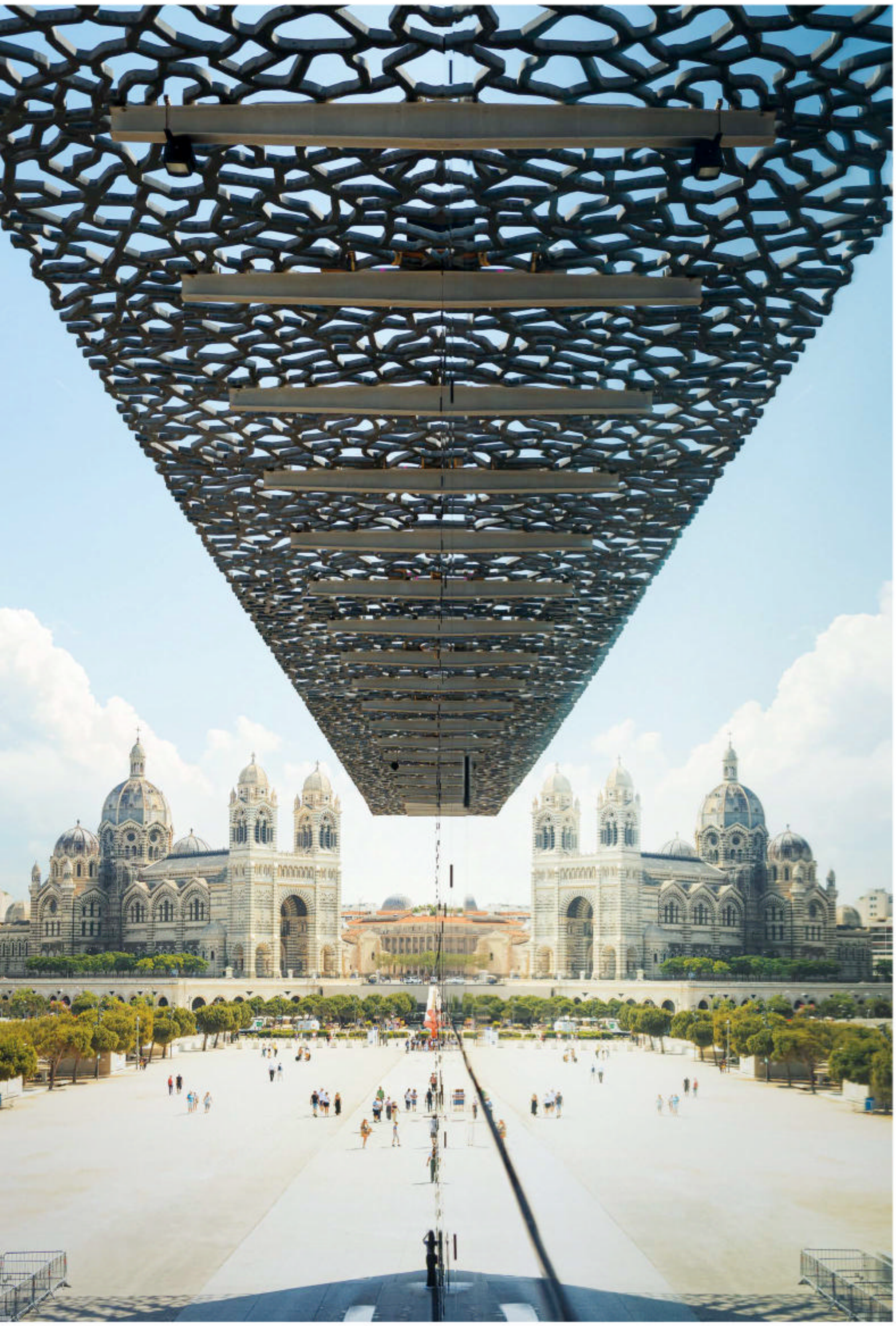
ANNA STECKA

IMAGE: GETTY; ALAMY

FRANCE

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER JONATHAN STOKES ON DISTILLING MARSEILLE'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE FOR OUR SEPTEMBER ISSUE



Tell us about this image.
The Cathédrale Sainte-Marie-Majeure appears alongside its mirror image, reflected in the glass of Mucem, a museum devoted to Mediterranean culture in Europe and North Africa. Both buildings are a short walk from Marseille's Vieux Port (Old Port), which has linked Europe to Africa for centuries and was redeveloped prior to the city being made the European Capital of Culture in 2013. For me, the area really sums up Marseille: a cosmopolitan coastal city immensely proud of its heritage and equally optimistic about its future.

How did you achieve the shot?
When I'm on assignment, I always keep a zoom lens to hand to capture those more unexpected moments. For this shot, I used a 24-70mm lens, shooting quite wide to capture the cathedral in its entirety and using the intricate lattice pattern on the dome as my focal point. I was standing in a stairwell leading towards Mucem at the time, so I placed the camera against the glass to obtain as seamless a reflection as possible.

What were the challenges at play?
When you're roaming the streets, it can be difficult to keep track of the sunlight. If I'd visited the cathedral later in the day, it might have been in shadow, so I had to find the right moment. Before taking this shot, I walked around Mucem's perimeter, taking note of the different views it had to offer. I was instinctively drawn to the reflections in the glass and knew there would be a shot to take somewhere there.

What did you enjoy most about this project?
I know Marseille very well, so working on this assignment forced me to look again at familiar locations. Searching for new angles and perspectives gave me a fresh appreciation for the diversity of the city and reminded me how enjoyable a place it is to explore on foot. In Marseille, you can be walking along an ancient city street and suddenly find yourself in a harbour staring out at these big coastal views.

View the full shoot and interview online at nationalgeographic.com/travel

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